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THE
MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

VOLUME VIII

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"WHEN A GENTLEMAN HALF SCALES A WALL"
Photogravure from original by Merrill.

"WHEN A GENTLEMAN HALF SCALES A WALL"

Photogravure from original by Merrill

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The Works of

George W. M. Reynolds

Venetia Trelawney

Volume III

The Mysteries of the Court of London

Privately Printed
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THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

CHAPTER I

THE COFFIN

It was the morning of the funeral. The blinds were drawn down throughout the front of the mansion; but no mutes appeared at the door, the obsequies being merely respectable and not fashionable.

From the period of being placed in her coffin, Ariadne had known but a few minutes of consciousness up to about ten o'clock on the morning of which we are now writing; and then she was awakened, as it were, from a profound sleep by hearing a strange noise. Gradually did consciousness resume its sway in her soul, — that consciousness which, every time it returned after an interval of stupor, was accompanied by so many harrowing memories, so many poignant reminiscences. But on the present occasion Ariadne was longer than usual in collecting her ideas and marshalling her confused thoughts so as to arrive at the comprehension of the full horror of her position. Indeed, at first she could not possibly conjecture what that strange noise might be, a noise which nevertheless grated so ominously in her ears and jarred against every chord in her heart. It was a fearful noise, a sound well calculated to inspire dread horror even before its full meaning was comprehended. But when the damsel's thoughts settled down into the proper cells of her mind, when her ideas became so disciplined as to take a consecutive order in her memory, then did the chain of

her recollections lead her on to the comprehension of this hideous noise that was grating and jarring close by her ears, and she felt, she knew, she understood that she was being screwed down in her coffin!

Let it not be thought that during the many intervals of consciousness which Ariadne had experienced, from the first moment of her seeming death until the present time, let it not be thought, we say, that she had forgotten to appeal to that Almighty Being in whom she put her faith. Far from it: all her thoughts during those intervals were a homage to the Deity and were interwoven with a train of reflections constituting a worship. For she had faith, the sublimest faith in the goodness, the wisdom, and the power of the Almighty; and thus was it that occasionally, as we have before stated, she experienced a gleam of hope; thus was it also that she had been led to dream of heaven. It was not because she experienced bitter, burning moments of agony, excruciating intervals of horror, and fits of the blackest despair, it was not because she thus felt all the weaknesses of human nature generally and of her own sex in particular, that the reader must suppose she did not pray or that she did not maintain her faith in Heaven. She had prayed, and she prayed now; in her soul did she pray deeply and fervently while the hideous noise of the coffin-screws grated upon her ears as they secured that lid which now seemed the barrier between herself and all earthly hope.

Her mind still retained a vivid clearness. She could think calmly, collectedly upon the past, upon the awful present, and upon that future in which she put her faith. She hoped that her spirit would soon leave its mortal habitation and fly to those eternal realms whereof she had a glimpse in her dreams. But as yet, although the coffin-lid was screwed down, she experienced no sense of suffocation, doubtless because the faculty of breathing was suspended in that state of asphyxia wherein she was wrapped. But it was from the coming scenes of the tremendous drama that her soul now recoiled so shudderingly, — the lowering into the grave, the shovelling in of the earth, and then the remaining in the clayey depth, perhaps to linger for days and days — Oh, this was the horror, the agony, the anguish!

But while these thoughts were fastening their gnawing,

vulture-talons upon her brain, the door of the chamber opened, and she almost immediately heard the voices of the Marquis of Leveson and Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Yes, through the coffin, through the shell, through the cerements, penetrated those voices; and one sank down, deep down, into her heart.

"Who will accompany us?" inquired Huntingdon, his voice made tremulous with a profound sorrow.

"I know of no one besides yourself and me who can attend as mourners," returned the marquis. "For appearance' sake, the undertaker and some of his men will follow in a second coach."

"Appearance' sake!" said the baronet, bitterly. "But no matter, it must be so. And now, if everything be in readiness —"

Here Ariadne's senses began to fail her, the stupor returned, and she heard no more.

But scarcely had oblivion thus poured its opiate-balm into her soul when the door of the apartment was opened hurriedly, and a servant made his appearance, saying to the marquis, "My lord, a young man desires to see either yourself or Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately. He wanted to come up, but I would not let him —"

"Ah! it is no doubt Theodore," interrupted the baronet.

"What! the brother," murmured the marquis. Then seizing the baronet forcibly by the arm, he said, in a low but rapid and earnest tone, "You will not compromise me, you have promised not to compromise me —"

"No, no," interrupted the baronet, impatiently. Then turning to the domestic, he said, "Let the young man come up."

The servant withdrew, and in less than half a minute the door opened again, and a genteel, good-looking, but care-worn and emaciated young man made his appearance. But the moment all the dread emblems of death, the coffin on the trestles, the undertaker and his men creeping about like black snakes, as they prepared the cloaks, put on the hatbands, and looked out the gloves, — in fine, as all the sombre features of the scene were embraced by that young man at a glance, he staggered against the door-post, and a deep, convulsing sob denoted the fulness of his mental agony.

"Mr. Varian, I presume?" said the baronet, advancing and taking the young man's hand.

"And you are Sir Douglas Huntingdon?" was the tremulous and indeed broken response; but although Theodore could say no more at the instant, yet he pressed the baronet's hand in token of ineffable gratitude.

"It is a melancholy scene for you, Mr. Varian," continued Sir Douglas, "but you must bear up with becoming fortitude against this affliction."

"Oh, that I had been here in time to fling one last look upon her sweet face, to imprint one last kiss upon her forehead!" murmured Theodore, clasping his hands and sobbing convulsively. "It would not bring her back to life, it would not restore to me my dearly beloved sister, but, nevertheless, it would be a satisfaction, a melancholy, mournful satisfaction."

"Do you really wish it, Mr. Varian?" asked Sir Douglas, deeply moved by the young man's almost heart-broken anguish.

"I do, I do," he answered, eagerly. "You know not, sir, how fondly, how devotedly, I have loved that dear sister of mine. Ah! sir, it was for her sake that I fell into the ways of error — But let that pass," he exclaimed, suddenly checking himself as he was reminded by the baronet's look that there were many strangers in the room; and although they of course knew who he was, since his name had been mentioned on his entrance, yet it was by no means necessary to enlighten them as to all the details of the past.

"Your wish shall be attended to, Mr. Varian," said the baronet. "It is but reasonable, it is but just; and, moreover, it will not detain the funeral procession many minutes." Then, turning to the undertaker, he said, "Remove that coffin-lid once more. This gentleman is the brother of the deceased."

Mr. Stimson and his men immediately set to work to obey the command they had just received, and in a few minutes the lid of the coffin was lifted away. Theodore Varian then approached, with that species of hesitation and reluctance which characterizes the first glance which a loving one bestows upon the beloved dead; but on reaching the head of the coffin, he stood gazing down fixedly and mourn-

fully upon the beautiful countenance of his sister. Sir Douglas Huntingdon also approached and contemplated the pale waxlike face of Ariadne, and at this moment, doubtless under the influence of the fresh air, the stupor abandoned her again and consciousness returned.

"Behold your sister, Mr. Varian," murmured Sir Douglas Huntingdon, in a trembling voice. "How little is she changed, although in death."

"She looks as if she only slept," returned Theodore, his own voice more tremulous still. "Alas, alas, poor sister! beautiful wast thou in life, beautiful art thou in death; and now thy soul is in heaven."

Ariadne heard the two voices, the voice of the baronet and the voice of her brother, and her ear lost not a single syllable that either voice thus uttered. But now those voices ceased, and were succeeded by the stifled sobs that proclaimed all the bitterness of Theodore's anguish. Heavens! would no revulsion now take place in the conditions of her being? Yes, she felt a quivering at the heart, such a sensation as she had not hitherto experienced throughout her trance; and almost at the same instant her brother exclaimed, in a tone wild with mingled hope and fear, "Good heavens! her lips moved!"

"Alas, no!" said the baronet. "It was but the fitful play of a sunbeam through the opening in the window-curtain."

"No, no!" cried Varian, in a tone of the most passionate and fervid exultation, "it is no dream, no delusion — There, behold it now!"

"Almighty powers! it is so," exclaimed the baronet. "She lives, she lives!"

All was now the most extraordinary confusion and excitement in that chamber. Ariadne was lifted out of the shell and placed upon the couch, a quivering of the lips, and a faint, or, rather, scarcely audible gasping, now being the unmistakable signs of returning consciousness. The undertaker and his men were hurried out of the room with the paraphernalia of death, Lady Ernestina and the housekeeper were summoned thither, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon himself sped away to fetch Doctor Copperas. Fortunately the physician was at home at the moment; but scarcely had the baronet explained to him, in a few hurried words, the resuscitation of Ariadne, when he exclaimed, "I will

hurry off to Leveson House at once; but do you proceed to Mayfair and fetch that truly eminent man, Doctor Thurston."

Away sped Doctor Copperas in one direction and the baronet in another. Doctor Thurston was at home, and on being informed by Sir Douglas of what had occurred, he said, "Most fortunate it is that Doctor Copperas has hastened to take the case in hand. There is not another man in England who has such experience in occurrences of suspended animation."

While thus speaking, Doctor Thurston put on his hat and gloves, and accompanied the baronet to Leveson House, where in the meantime Ariadne had returned to complete consciousness. We need hardly say that the scene which then took place between the brother and sister thus reunited under such extraordinary circumstances was touching in the extreme. Theodore strained Ariadne to his breast and covered her with the tenderest caresses. Ernestina and the housekeeper, fearful that some explanation might take place on the part of the damsel relative to the treatment she had received at the mansion, besought Theodore to withdraw, alleging as the reason that this prolonged excitement on the part of Ariadne might be followed by a relapse. But when the young girl beheld the housekeeper at her bedside and caught a glimpse of the Marquis of Leveson at the other extremity of the room, she clung tenaciously to her brother's neck, murmuring, in low and broken accents, "Do not go, dearest Theodore, do not leave me! Oh, do not leave me again, I beseech you!"

The brother saw by the affrighted manner in which her azure eyes swept their looks around that she was in dread of those present; and it instantaneously flashed to his mind that she had perchance experienced some foul play, and that he was not as yet acquainted with all the circumstances of her supposed death. Indeed, when first informed, through the medium of the baronet's letter, that his sister had died beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson, vague and undefined suspicions of evil had sprung up in his imagination, for the name of Leveson was known to him as that of a nobleman much addicted to pleasure. This suspicion now appeared to receive confirmation from Ariadne's affrighted manner; but it was not the moment and it was not the

place for him to make inquiries into past circumstances. Indeed, he had scarcely time to breathe a few reassuring words in Ariadne's ear when Doctor Copperas arrived.

The young maiden at once recognized the physician, and welcomed him as a friend. The housekeeper, observing that Ariadne viewed her with evident mistrust and aversion, stole out of the room, and the marquis speedily followed her. Lady Ernestina, however, remained; and by at once adopting the kindest, most soothing, and the tenderest manner toward Ariadne, she made a favourable impression both upon the damsel and Theodore. In a short time Doctor Thurston arrived, accompanied by the baronet; and as Ariadne almost immediately inquired of the latter concerning the excellent and kind-hearted Mrs. Baines, he at once volunteered to go and fetch her. Ariadne expressed her joy and gratitude at the proposal; and Sir Douglas accordingly sallied forth again, while the medical men adopted such measures as their skill suggested to guard against a relapse on the part of the resuscitated maiden.

In about twenty minutes the baronet returned with Mrs. Baines, and affecting to a degree was the meeting between that worthy woman and Ariadne. Indeed, Mrs. Baines declared her intention of remaining at Leveson House to act as the damsel's nurse until her complete restoration to health; and thus the now happy girl found herself the object of the kindest attentions and surrounded by friendly faces.

But in the meantime the Marquis of Leveson and his own housekeeper were seriously alarmed lest Theodore Varian should learn sufficient from his sister's lips to induce him to make an exposure of their infamous treatment toward her. Sir Douglas Huntingdon, however, presently sought an opportunity of speaking to the marquis upon the subject.

"Ariadne is now past all danger of a relapse," he said. "The physicians have left her for the present, and she remains in the care of my housekeeper, Mrs. Baines. Of course the chamber which she occupies in your house must be her home until her health will permit her removal elsewhere. Her brother is now about to accompany me to my hotel, that we may have some conversation together. He already suspects that his sister has experienced ill-treatment of some kind, and therefore it is my intention to tell him all the truth at once. But I trust that by my earnest recommendation

he will be induced to pass over, if not actually to forgive or forget, your conduct toward his sister. Exposure will benefit no one, and, innocent though she be, would nevertheless wound the delicacy of Miss Varian herself. Her brother will doubtless admit the justice of this reasoning, and therefore I do not think that you need labour under any apprehension of his vengeance."

"I thank you much, most sincerely, for these assurances," said the marquis. "Pray make my peace with the young man, and tell him that if a few hundred pounds will be of any service — "

"I am very much mistaken," interrupted the baronet, with ill-concealed disgust, "if Theodore Varian be not quite a different person — "

"Well, well, there's no harm in mentioning the money matter," said the marquis, painfully anxious to avoid exposure on any terms; for he knew full well that if it became noised abroad that his house contained such auxiliaries to his sensuality as the mechanical chairs, the indignation of the populace would be so excited that his life would not be safe. "But you and I, Huntingdon," he added, "on what terms are we to remain in future?"

"Lord Leveson," said the baronet, in a tone that was rather sorrowful than angry, "I am not enough of a saint myself to enable me to take up stones to cast at you; but at the same time I think that there are extremes into which it is possible to plunge in the gratification of one's passions, and deep into those extremes have you been hurried."

With these words the baronet turned away; and quitting the room, he joined Theodore Varian, who was waiting for him in the hall. The two left the house together, the young man feeling fully satisfied that in Mrs. Baines his sister had a tender nurse as well as a careful guardian and a true friend.

As for Mr. Stimson, he and his men, amidst wonder and amazement at the resuscitation, bore away all the paraphernalia of death; but as the bill was promptly paid by Lord Leveson, the undertaker found nothing to complain of.

And now, ere closing this chapter, we must state that Doctor Copperas, on returning home, sat down to pen a detailed account of the case of resuscitation, in the course of which he declared "that his treatment of it was materially

assisted by the advice of that truly remarkable man, Doctor Thurston;" while, on the other hand, Doctor Thurston likewise sat down to pen his narrative, which he interlarded with many compliments to " that ornament of his profession, Doctor Copperas." These statements appeared respectively in the next numbers of the *Scalpel* and the *Splint*, and created a marvellous sensation throughout the medical world.

CHAPTER II

MOTHER FRANKLIN

It will be remembered that the Hangman and Bencull had resolved, after due consultation, to make away with the formidable Bow Street officer, Mr. Lawrence Sampson. Their project was to entice him, by some means or another, down to the dark crib in Jacob's Island, where three or four of the gang would lie in readiness to put the murderous scheme into execution; while the Hangman himself was to call at Larry's house in Long Acre on some pretence and get possession of the police book. With a view to the effectual carrying out of this plan, Nell Gibson had been selected as the most fitting instrument of the plotters, and at the same time the Buttoner had been appointed as a spy upon her actions.

It was necessary to remind the reader of these particulars; and we must add that, although the Hangman's gang subsequently discovered certain proofs of what they believed to be Nell Gibson's treachery toward them in respect to their dealings with Sir Douglas Huntingdon, they had agreed, after calm deliberation, to conceal their knowledge of the young woman's additional perfidy in respect to the note which had been intercepted by the Buttoner. To that resolve they had come, as we described at the time, with a view to ascertain whether she were also betraying them with respect to the plot initiated in reference to Larry Sampson.

It was now a week since the memorable night of the fire; and if, at about six o'clock in the evening, we peep into Mr. Lawrence Sampson's comfortable parlour at his house in Long Acre, we shall behold him sitting by the fire reading a book and discussing a glass of wine. Presently the door

opened, and his housekeeper, Dame Margery, came to announce that a very old woman, who refused to give her name, wished to speak to him. The Bow Street officer, who never refused to see anybody on business, at once desired that she should be admitted, and accordingly the visitant was shown into his presence.

Dame Margery withdrew; and Larry Sampson instantaneously recognized the old harridan, who, bent double with age, now advanced toward him, shaking her head and wagging her toothless jaws with a horrible kind of mysterious significancy.

"Do you know who I be?" she asked, in a voice something between a cackle and a squeak.

"Yes, to be sure," responded Larry. "You are Mother Franklin, and you live over at Mrs. Young's in Bermondsey. Now, then, what do you want with me?"

"Ah! I thought as how you would know who I was," said the old woman, with a merry laugh, which nevertheless struck hideous upon the ear. "You know everybody, Mr. Sampson, and everybody knows you."

Thus speaking, Mother Franklin took from her pocket a round snuff-box with an indecent picture upon the lid; and while regaling herself with a pinch, some of the snuff got into her throat, thereby exciting so painful a cough that it seemed as if the old hag was about to choke, while the scalding rheum poured down her wrinkled cheeks, leaving her eyes horribly red and bleared. She was wrapped in an old dingy red cloak, with the hood drawn over her head, and she walked with a stick. Her whole appearance was therefore not unlike that of one of the lowest and most wretched class of vagabond fortune-tellers; and now, as she stood shaking from head to foot with that prolonged hacking cough, Larry Sampson could scarcely avoid turning away from her in disgust.

"Well, what is it you want with me?" he inquired again, after a sufficient pause to allow the harridan to recover from the effects of the snuff getting into her throat.

"I can do you a service, Mr. Sampson," she said, now taking a seat, "a wery great service, too, I can assure you."

"But it is doubtless to do yourself a service at the same time, Mother Franklin," observed Larry, "or else you

would not come to me. Therefore pray get to the point at once, and tell me what you want."

"There's a plot agin you, Mr. Sampson, a deep-laid plot," said the old woman, looking at him significantly with her bleared eyes, "and if you don't mind, it will be the wuss for you, that it will."

"Ah! I am constantly hearing of plots and schemes against me," observed the Bow Street officer, with an air of indifference, "but you see I survive them all. However, if you have really anything to tell me, do it quickly. Describe your motives in thus putting me on my guard, and also say what reward you expect."

"The reward I shall leave to you, Mr. Sampson," replied the old harridan, "for I know you will treat me well. I shall be eighty-nine come next Febiverry, and that's a age which you won't treat with disrespect. But I say now, hasn't that Gibson gal been three or four times with you?"

"Just so," replied Sampson. "What then?"

"She's playing you false, sir," resumed Mother Franklin. "It's all a plant of the Hangman's and Bencull's, I can promise you."

"I had my suspicions, I can assure you," observed Sampson, with his habitual coolness. "Go on."

"I'll tell you all, but it will be best to begin at the beginning. Well, sir, one day the Hangman called at your house — this wery house, I mean," continued the old hag, "and somehow or another he managed to get into a secret room of yours where there's a many dresses, and he also saw a great big book that you've got and where you write down everything that happens. Ha! ha!" laughed the hag, shaking her head significantly, "you see I know something worth your knowing, and you also see, by the same token, that I am telling the truth. Well, in that great book the Hangman read a many things, and all about your dressing up yourself as a knife-grinder and going down to Folly Bridges, — that's Jacob's Island, you know, — and getting chucked into the ditch. So, you see, the Hangman found out that you know a good deal too much to suit him and the rest of the gang, and so he has planted Nell Gibson upon you to 'tice you down to the dark crib, where you'll be done for; and at the same time the Hangman means to come here to your house and get hold of the great book, so that it

mayn't fall into the hands of any other Bow Street runner."

Larry Sampson certainly was very far from being prepared for all this information, but he outwardly manifested no surprise. Surprised he however really was to hear that Daniel Coffin had managed to obtain admission to his secret chamber; but what he was now told in respect to Nell Gibson only confirmed certain suspicions which he had previously entertained relative to the purport of three or four visits which she had paid him.

"Now, Mrs. Franklin," he said, "I see that you are telling me the truth; and here's ten guineas for you," added Larry, counting the gold pieces down upon the table. "The next thing you must do is to let me know how you happened to discover all that is going on, and why you now come and betray the matter to me. Do this, and you shall have another ten guineas upon the spot."

For years and years past the wages of crime had not been so abundant at any one period for Mother Franklin as the harvest which she was now reaping, and with a chuckle of delight she secured the first ten guineas about her person, and then proceeded to give those explanations that should ensure to her the second ten guineas.

"Well, Mr. Sampson," she said, "the truth is that Nell Gibson has always been harsh and bitter toward me, and I hate her, — I have long hated her. Then the Hangman, too, he jeered and taunted and laughed at me one night, and I swore to be revenged, for I hate him also. So, seeing that he had something secret to say to Nell Gibson, I listened at the door. Ha! ha!" laughed the hag, with her hideous cackle, "my ears were sharp enough then, I can tell you; and as luck would have it, no one disturbed me in the passage all the time I was listening at the door. So I heard everything that passed, that's how I came to know what was going on. Ever since, — for this was more than three weeks ago, just at the beginning of November, — ever since then, I say, I have listened and watched and peeped and peered at all that was going on, and what with catching a word now and a word then, and hearing a bit of a whispered conversation at one time and a bit at another, I found out that the plot was still going on agin you, that Nell Gibson has been to you several times with a rigmarole tale, and that she fancies you

are quite falling into the snare. Well, Mr. Sampson, she's coming up to you to-night; and so I managed to get away for a couple of hours, on some excuse, just to give you this warning. But if you want again to know why I do it, it is because I hate the Hangman, I hate Nell Gibson also. She has called me a witch, and he has called me a beldam; and she threatened to leave Mother Young's establishment if I didn't hold my tongue, and he tossed me a shilling, a beggarly shilling, as if I was a beggar. And so for all this," shrieked forth the hag, raising her voice in a horrible excitement, "I want revenge, I want revenge, and now I shall get it!"

The thrilling, querulous tone to which her accents had risen soon merged into a cough so sharp and convulsing that it almost seemed to shatter the old witch to pieces; and a horrible spectacle was she with her toothless jaws wagging, her head shaking, and the scalding rheum pouring out of her bleared eyes.

"Ah! I could let you into a many secrets if I chose about the Hangman, and Nell Gibson, and all the rest of the precious gang," continued the hag, "and I will do it soon, too, for they've all took to bullying and baiting me just because I am a poor old woman that will be eighty-nine come next Febiverry. But here's one thing I'll tell you, Mr. Sampson, but pray mind and never say that you heard anything from my lips, or that I peached against them folks — "

"Oh, that is an understood thing between you and me," exclaimed Sampson. "Proceed, Mrs. Franklin, with what you were about to tell me."

"Well, sir," she resumed, "from a conversation that I overheard it seems that it was the Hangman's party which caused the fire at some baronet's t'other night — "

"Ah! Sir Douglas Huntingdon's, you mean," interjected Sampson. "But how was that?"

"Why," returned the old hag, "the fellows got into the stable with the intention of breaking into the other part of the house; but somehow or another their lantern broke, and the light falling on some hay or straw set the whole place into a blaze. Ha! ha! all their wickedness shall come out soon; I'll unmask them, the villains, I will!" she cried, again exalting her voice into a querulous thrill. "But I can't stay any longer now. I must get back as soon as

possible. Another time I'll tell you more. At all events, I've told you enow for the present to put you on your guard against your enemies, Mr. Sampson."

Having thus spoken, the harridan received the second ten guineas, and took her departure, mumbling to herself, "Ha! now I shall be revenged. Daniel Coffin said he should have the satisfaction of tucking me up before he died; but I shall have the pleasure of seeing him swing to the gallows-tree, ha! ha! ha!"

About an hour afterward Nell Gibson was ushered by Dame Margery into the presence of the Bow Street officer.

"Well, it is for to-night," said the young woman the moment the housekeeper had retired and she found herself alone with Larry Sampson.

"Ah! it is for to-night, eh?" he said, affecting to fall most credulously into the snare spread to enmesh him. "And where is the conference to take place?"

"Down at Bencull's dark crib," replied Nell Gibson, fixing a searching glance upon Sampson, so as to penetrate into the depths of his soul and thus assure herself that he really suspected nothing.

"Now let us understand the whole thing thoroughly, so that there may be no mistake," he observed, motioning Nell Gibson to take a seat and handing her a glass of wine. "According to what you have previously told me, the Hangman's gang contemplate some desperate and astounding deed of villainy, the nature of which is, however, unknown to you. They have already had two or three consultations, from which you have been excluded; and now to-night the last consultation is to be held, to settle the whole plan and arrange all the proceedings. Is not this it?"

"That is exactly how the matter stands, Mr. Sampson," replied Nell Gibson.

"Well, then," resumed the officer, "you must now tell me all over again exactly what you propose; because having a great many different things to think of, I may not perhaps exactly remember all you have said to me at our previous interviews."

"I can explain myself over again in a very few words," said Nell Gibson. "You must understand that at the back of the dark crib there is a sort of gallery, overlooking the ditch —"

"Yes, and overhanging it also," interrupted Sampson. "After you came to me on the first occasion, I went down to the Folly Bridges and took a survey of the place. Of course I had often been there before, but after what you told me I thought it best to get an accurate idea of the locality. And now please to continue your explanations."

"Since you have been down to the place to look at it so particularly," resumed Nell, "you may have noticed that if you get on the wooden bridge you can easily climb along to the gallery at the back of the dark crib; and there you can lie concealed, listening at the window to all that takes place inside the back room."

"Well, the plan is feasible enough," observed Sampson, steadily and composedly meeting the keen and penetrating look which Nell Gibson fixed upon him from beneath her eyelids; and thus while she fancied that he did not perceive how intently though furtively she was watching him, he not only saw that he was thus scrutinized, but also encountered the scrutiny without exciting a suspicion. "And how many do you think will be there to-night?" he inquired.

"Ah! there will be several of them," answered Nell Gibson, "for the best part of the gang are in this business; and that's the reason why I know it must be something of the utmost importance."

"And have you failed to wheedle the secret out of the Buttoner? — for he is your fancy man, I believe," said Larry Sampson.

"The Buttoner is as close as the door of Newgate and as down as the knocker itself," replied Nell. "When he was drunk I have tried to pump him, but it was all no go. Besides which, the Buttoner never will trust a woman; and so if he did tell me anything, it couldn't be relied on as true. It would only be some invention of his to put me on a wrong scent. But I know that whatever the business now in hand may be, there's murder in it, and also the hope of an immense booty."

"And how do you know this?" inquired Sampson.

"Because the Buttoner cleaned up his pistols this morning, and sharpened the blade of a hideous clasp-knife that he's got. He didn't think I paid particular attention to what he was doing, but I did, though. Moreover, I dropped in, quite in a leisurely way, at the dark crib this afternoon, and I saw

Bencull busy examining his pistols also. The Mushroom Faker arrived at the dark crib last night, and brought his pistols with him, and I heard him say in an undertone to Bencull something about its being very probable that they should soon have more money than they would possibly know what to do with."

"But could not you by some means or another secrete yourself in the gallery behind the dark crib and hear what is going on to-night?" asked Sampson, raising a sort of objection merely to prevent Nell Gibson from thinking that he fell too readily into the snare.

"If I could, you may depend upon it I would," she answered, "but it's impossible. I must get back now as quick as I can to Mother Young's, and I sha'n't be able to stir out again all the evening. No, Mr. Sampson, this is a thing that you must take in hand yourself; and remember that when I first came to you, our solemn understanding was that whatever took place between us was not to be communicated to a third person. But I must be off now," she exclaimed, rising from her seat as she heard a clock in another room striking eight.

"But I have not yet given you any portion of the reward that you stipulated for," observed Sampson.

"I will come for it when the business is over," said Nell Gibson. "Besides, the best and most welcome reward that I can have is to revenge myself for the ill-treatment of the Buttoner, the insulting taunts of the Hangman, because I refused to submit to his wishes, and the coarse brutality of that detestable Bencull. In fact, Mr. Sampson, as I have told you before, I have a thousand wrongs to avenge against those villains, and now is the time."

"Yes, there shall be ample revenge for you, Miss Gibson," observed Larry. "Whatever these fellows plot and plan to-night shall send them all to the scaffold. But what time will they be assembled in their ruffian conclave?"

"At about eleven o'clock," returned Nell. "If you secrete yourself in the gallery at that hour, it will be ample time."

"And you are certain that there is no danger of any of the fellows going out into that gallery?"

"Not a bit of it," responded Nell Gibson. "You will not incur the slightest peril."

The young woman then took her departure; and when she was gone, Larry Sampson thought within himself, "The plot is a clumsy one, and even without Mother Franklin's warning, I should not have fallen very readily into the snare. But that Nell Gibson is a clever and a cunning girl, and performs her part well. However, she and her comrades will all be astonished at the lesson I shall read them to-night."

The Bow Street officer then resumed the perusal of his book with as much calmness and composure as if nothing extraordinary were on the tapis; but at about half-past nine o'clock he prepared to sally forth, having previously, however, given some special instructions to his housekeeper relative to the mode in which a certain person was to be received during his absence.

Meantime the Hangman, the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and Bob the Durrynacker were all assembled at the dark crib in company with Bencull. This precious company was seated in that same room at the back to which our readers have been previously introduced, and the table was as usual covered with the materials for drinking and smoking, or, as the men themselves expressed it, "a regular booze."

"Well, do you still think your blowen is staunch in this matter?" asked the Hangman, addressing himself to the Buttoner.

"I have no reason as yet to think otherwise," was the response. "But of course, after the tricks she has already played us, it is impossible to say. She ought to be back by this time, and then we shall see what she says."

"And if she did mean to betray us in any way, how should we know it?" asked Bencull.

"She can't betray us into Sampson's power for anything particular we are doing at this moment," observed the Hangman. "All the harm she can do is to put him up to snuff respecting our intentions toward him; and in that case of course he won't come down and hide himself in the gallery."

At this moment a knock was heard at the street door, and Bencull, hastening to answer the summons, gave admittance to Nell Gibson. The young woman entered the back room with her wonted calmness and self-possession. Indeed, there was no reason why she should look or feel otherwise, inasmuch as so far from contemplating any

treachery in the present instance, she had faithfully and, as she believed, successfully, performed her part in the drama now in progress.

" It is all right," she said, taking a seat next to the Buttoner. " Larry Sampson, having nibbled at the bait for the last three weeks, has now swallowed it completely, and he will be in that gallery at eleven o'clock to-night."

" And you don't think he suspects anything, Nell? " said the Hangman, inquiringly, as he looked at her intently from beneath his overhanging brows.

" I am sure he does not," she answered, with perfect composure. " Or if he does, then is he the greatest adept at concealing his thoughts that I ever saw in all my life."

" Well, of course, he is all that," growled Bencull, " but I should have thought that you was more experter still, Miss Nell, and so you might have seen whether he took it all in for gospel or not."

" Again I tell you," said the young woman, now speaking somewhat impetuously, " that, as far as I could possibly judge, Larry Sampson believed I was performing a real part. But I suppose that after what occurred on Shooter's Hill you mean to suspect everything I do and every word I speak? Now, then, I tell you again, and for the last time, that you are wrong. I tried to save Huntingdon because he was the first man, in fact the only man, I ever loved; and what I did the other night I would do over again, for I wouldn't have a hair of his head injured. But in other matters I would die sooner than betray you, — yes, by God! I would die first."

And having worked herself up to a pitch of powerful excitement, she struck her clenched hand so forcibly upon the table that bottles and glasses and tobacco-pipes all danced and rattled as if the floor of the room was upheaving with an earthquake.

" Come now, Nell, none of this nonsense," said the Buttoner. " We ain't suspecting you at the present moment. In fact, hain't we promised to look over what you did t'other night on Shooter's Hill, if so be we saw that you proved faithful in the little business now in hand? "

" Well, and you will see, too," returned Nell Gibson, sulkily. " But I suppose you don't want me to wait any longer? "

"No," replied the Buttoner, "you can be off and get back to Mother Young's. There's enough of us here to do the business without you. But here, take a drop of summut short first," and he handed her a glass of spirits.

"Well, here's success to you," said Nell, her good-humour returning, and she tossed off the burning alcohol; then replacing the glass on the table, she took her departure.

"I raly don't know what to make of that gal," said the Buttoner, after a brief pause. "I have been her flash man for the last three weeks, and can't understand her yet."

"She's as deep and artful as the devil," said Bencull, "and that's why I first of all recommended her in this job. But if so be she should turn her artifice against us — "

"Then, by Satan! she shall suffer for it," exclaimed the Hangman, rising from his seat and buttoning up his coat.

"Ay, that she should," said the Mushroom Faker.

"And I would help to do for her," added Bob the Durrynacker.

"Well, we shall know more about it presently, I dare say," observed the Hangman. "And now I am off up to Long Acre to call at Larry's and see if I can get hold of the police book. I hope when I come back, in two or three hours or so," he added, with a look ominously ferocious, "I shall hear that Larry Sampson is deep down at the bottom of the ditch."

Then jerking his thumb significantly over his shoulder toward the window, the Hangman put on his hat and quitted the room.

Bencull, the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker now remained together at the dark crib, smoking and drinking, and conversing on the business which they had in hand. Once or twice Bencull went out to the street door, to ascertain, as he expressed himself, "what sort of a night it was;" and returning on each occasion to his companions to report that the moon was coming out clearer and brighter, they with one accord regretted that it was not pitch-dark, considering the enterprise they had in progress. For although none of the inhabitants of Jacob's Island might be supposed to be overparticular, yet it was somewhat too serious an affair to have the eyes of neighbours catching a glimpse of any murderous proceeding by the aid of moon-

light. But this risk must, however, be run, and the four ruffians made up their minds accordingly.

After repeated references to a huge silver watch which he carried in his fob, Mr. Bencull at last intimated that it was now eleven o'clock; and the Buttoner was just suggesting that they should wait another quarter of an hour before rushing out into the gallery, when a knock was heard at the street door.

"Who can that be?" said Bencull, in a tone of vexation. "Perhaps old Jeremy Humpage, or the Swag Chovey Bloak —"

"Well, whoever it is," interrupted the Buttoner, "he mustn't be let into our secrets. Tell him there's summut wery partickler and private going on."

"Oh, leave me to make an excuse," growled Bencull; and taking up the light he went to the door.

But no pen can describe the mingled astonishment and dismay which seized upon him when the flickering rays of the candle fell upon the countenance of Mr. Lawrence Sampson!

CHAPTER III

THE RESULTS OF THE PLOT

"Ah! Bencull, how are you?" said the Bow Street official, in an easy offhand manner. "The fact is that I wanted to have a word or two with you, and thought this as good a time as any."

Thus speaking, Mr. Sampson unceremoniously entered the house, passed by Bencull, and proceeded straight to the room at the back. Bencull, recovering somewhat from his astonishment, hastily shut the door and followed close behind, the light which he carried revealing the person of the newcomer to the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker. These individuals were as much astounded as the landlord of the place had been, on beholding the object of their murderous purpose thus familiarly and coolly appear before them. He was attired in his usual manner, and had his hands thrust into the depths of his capacious breeches pockets.

Entering the room and throwing himself leisurely upon a chair, Mr. Sampson glanced around him with a peculiar smile, observing, "Well, there are no strange faces here. I have had the pleasure of being acquainted with every one of you for a long time past, — personally at least, if not to speak to."

There was a slight accent of irony in his tone and a similar expression in his look; so that the four ruffians exchanged dubious and inquiring glances with each other, as much as to say, "What on earth does all this mean?" Indeed, they knew not what to think nor what to do; but with a sort of consternation upon them, they awaited in silence for Larry Sampson to explain himself further.

"Now, my good friends," resumed the officer, pushing

his chair back against the wall so that no one could get behind him, and then lounging in it with an easy and confident manner, as if he felt assured that though in the lion's den he was perfectly safe, "now, my good friends," he repeated, "don't you think that all your united wisdom, — especially when combined with that of Daniel Coffin, — should have devised some scheme more feasible and likely-looking than this clumsy affair which you have trumped up to ensnare me?"

"Trapped, by goles!" exclaimed Bencull, his countenance becoming black as thunder.

"Nosed upon, as sure as fate!" muttered the Mushroom Faker.

"Done brown!" added Bob the Durrynacker, also in an undertone.

"Perdition seize that Nell Gibson!" murmured the Buttoner, between his set teeth, as he clenched his hands with convulsive violence, his mind being already intent on a horrible revenge for what he supposed to be the perfidy of his mistress.

"Need I tell you what ridiculous figures you cut?" resumed Larry Sampson, secretly enjoying their confusion. "But I only wish that your accomplice, Nell Gibson, was here to see how completely all her artifices have been penetrated by me. As for your friend the Hangman, I suppose he has gone up to my house in the hope of obtaining possession of my secret register. He will be miserably disappointed," added the officer, dryly.

"You are talking the Chinese langvidge, Mr. Sampson," growled Bencull, endeavouring to put a good face on the matter, if possible. "We don't understand you; there ain't no plot, no scheme, no nothink — "

"Denial is useless, my good fellow," interrupted the officer. "You expected that I should be concealed in the gallery outside here at eleven o'clock; but instead of that, I thought it would be better to drop in as I have done, and tell you to beware in future how you plot against me. After the glimpse which the Hangman obtained of my secret book one day, he should have known that there are few things done in London which escape my knowledge; and perhaps you will be surprised when I tell you that the origin of the fire at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's house a week ago is known to me."

"Then, by goles!" shouted Bencull, starting from his seat, "there's no doubt as to who — "

"No doubt at all!" exclaimed the Buttoner, dashing his clenched fist violently against the table.

"Patience, patience," said Larry Sampson, coolly. "I tell you that it is vain and useless for you to conjecture how I obtained my information. Every crime committed in London is known to me, and the authors of it are likewise known; but it doesn't always suit my purposes to bring them at once to justice." Then fixing his eyes upon Bencull and the Buttoner, he said, "You two men and Daniel Coffin were the authors of that fire at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. You forced an entrance into the stable with the intention of breaking into the dwelling-house; but the light fell from your lantern, and the place was soon in a blaze. Is this true, or is it not? Fools!" ejaculated Larry Sampson, contemptuously, "if such a mysterious circumstance as that is known to me in all its details, how do you think that this miserable clumsy murder-plot of yours could escape my knowledge?"

Bencull and the Buttoner now exchanged looks of gloomy alarm, for they felt persuaded that they were about to be apprehended on account of the burglary and fire at the baronet's; while the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker likewise fancied that such was to be their two comrades' fate. Indeed all four villains made sure that the dark crib was surrounded by Sampson's runners, and for this reason they did not offer to lay a finger upon the formidable functionary himself.

"Although such a pack of hangdog scoundrels as you," resumed Larry, "deserve no mercy at my hands, yet I do not mind putting you at your ease in one respect; and that is," he continued, addressing himself particularly to Bencull and the Buttoner, "I do not mean to take you two up, nor yet your friend the Hangman, for that business at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. Not that I am overdesirous to show you any leniency, but because I cannot make use of the evidence I have obtained to bring the deed home to you. So now," he added, "let me give you a word of warning, which is, that if you don't break up your gang, get out of London, and disperse over the country as quick as possible, I will hunt you all to the gibbet. Now I have

given you fair warning, and I hope you will be wise enough to take it."

"And what's to prevent us from knocking you on the head and shoving you out into the ditch?" exclaimed the Buttoner, suddenly struck with the idea that if Larry Sampson had not come thither for the purpose of effecting any arrests, it was very probable he was unattended by his myrmidons.

"You will not attempt any such thing," answered Sampson, coolly, "because, in the first place, I should shoot you through the head," and as he spoke he drew forth his hands from his capacious pockets, each hand being armed with a double-barrelled pistol. "Moreover," he continued, "if you just tap at that window, three or four of my men will rush in from the gallery; and at the first report of one of these pistols half a dozen more of my runners will break into the house from the street. So now you are forewarned of the consequences of any attempt to molest me."

The Buttoner sank down upon his chair again in gloomy sullenness; and Bencull, lighting a pipe, puffed away with the air of a man who feels himself in unpleasant circumstances, but endeavours to appear as unconcerned as possible. As for the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker, they tossed off frequent bumpers of spirits, doubtless to arm themselves with courage for any emergency that might ensue. But Mr. Sampson in reality seemed to have no inclination to push matters to the extreme on the present occasion; and replacing his pistols in his pocket, he said, "Now, Mr. Bencull, I will thank you to go first and open your street door for me."

The landlord of the dark crib was too well pleased at this command not to obey it with alacrity, and the Bow Street officer issued forth from the den of infamy. Immediately upon emerging into Mill Street, he blew a whistle with a peculiar note of shrillness; and Bencull, keeping the door ajar in order to watch till the "enemy" had departed, perceived that this was the signal for the runners to leave the vicinage of the dark crib. Larry Sampson passed up the street, and one after the other Bencull counted no less than eight runners whom he recognized as they followed at short intervals. Then, when the coast was once more clear, he

shut the door and returned to the room where his three companions had remained.

"Betrayed — basely betrayed!" he growled forth as he replaced the light on the table and flung himself upon the bench.

"Yes, and there's no doubt as to who's betrayed us," said the Buttoner. "Nell Gibson alone could have peached about that business at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. I dare say instead of having gone back to Mother Young's, she's cut and bolted. But at all events, I'll go and see."

"No, stay here, old feller," exclaimed Bencull. "Let's do nothing hastily, for there's no telling how Larry may have his eye upon us. At all events, let's see whether the Hangman comes back, and if so, what he says."

This advice was adopted, and the four ruffians applied themselves with renewed energy to the spirits and tobacco, in order to cheer their minds after the scene that had just taken place, the particulars of which afforded them ample food for discussion till about half-past twelve o'clock, when the Hangman returned.

Bursting with the fury of his pent-up feelings, the diabolical nature of which was reflected upon his countenance, Daniel Coffin no sooner entered the little room than he demanded what had taken place. In a few hurried words the required explanations were given; and he in his turn was then called upon to describe how he had fared in Long Acre.

"By Satan! I scarcely know that I shall have patience enough to tell you," he exclaimed, his naturally hangdog countenance suddenly assuming a look so truly diabolical that even his companions felt their blood run cold in their veins for a moment. "But, however, let me try and compose myself to a task that is ten thousand times more unpleasant than tucking up a feller at the Old Bailey. Well, on reaching Long Acre, a little after eleven, I knocked at Sampson's door, and Dame Margery — that's his old housekeeper, you know — almost immediately opened it. 'Pray, ma'am,' says I, 'is Mr. Sampson at home?' just for all the world as if I hadn't the least idea that he was out. 'No, sir, he is not,' says she in such a civil manner that I really thought the old girl didn't recollect who I was; but she speedily undeceived me on this point, saying, 'I think you

are Mr. Coffin, if I mistake not?' 'Well, ma'am,' says I, 'Dan'el Coffin is my name, for want of a better. But it's very provoking that Mr. Sampson is out, for I want to speak to him very particular.' 'I think he said he was going down to Jacob's Island,' observes the old housekeeper; and you may be assured that I was deuced glad to hear this, because, of course, I felt certain that he had fallen into the trap. 'Do you think he will be long, ma'am?' says I. 'I dare say a couple of hours,' she answered, 'but can't you call back again? or else perhaps you will walk in and wait till he comes home?' 'Well, ma'am,' says I, not appearing to catch too greedily at the offer, although it was just what I wanted, 'perhaps that's the best thing I can do.' 'Walk in, then, sir,' says Dame Margery, so polite and civil and simpering I never saw anything like it; and so she showed me into the breakfast-parlour and there left me. I let about ten minutes elapse, and then thinking that the coast must be clear, I took a candle, stole out of the parlour, crept up the stairs, and was within half a dozen steps of the landing, when lo and behold! the light of the candle suddenly showed me three Bow Street runners sitting on the top step, each with a brace of pistols in his hands. You may easily suppose that I was taken so aback I didn't know what the deuce to do; while a voice seemed to whisper in my ears, 'You are betrayed! you are betrayed!' The three runners burst out laughing, and one of them cried, 'Holloa, Dan'el! what are you doing here?' 'Why, I only walked up in a fit of absence of mind,' says I, no better excuse coming into my head at the instant, 'but what are you doing here?' 'Oh, only mounting guard over the police book, which somebody or another has vowed to possess himself of to-night. But of course such a respectable gentleman as you, Mr. Coffin, can't have come here for any such purpose,' and then the three scoundrels burst out into such another horse-laugh that I could have killed them on the spot. In fact, I was more than half a mind to fall foul on them; but seeing that the game was all up with regard to Larry, and that whatever I might do would only put me deeper into his power, I pretended to put a good face on the matter and tried to laugh away my confusion. They didn't make any attempt to detain me, and so I wished them good night and got out of the house a precious deal quicker than I entered it.

By Satan! I was never in such a precious rage in my life. I could have blown up the whole world with gunpowder if I had had a chance. I was actually boiling over with a passion that it hurt me to keep down. While hastening back here as quick as I could, a thousand strange thoughts entered my head. I fancied that I should find you all arrested, and that I was only suffered to go at large from Long Acre in order to be nabbed when returning either home to Fleet Lane, or else coming down here at the Folly Bridges. Then I thought that perhaps Larry only meant to make a joke of it, after all. So what with some hesitation and a good deal of desperation, I resolved to come straight on here and learn what had taken place. But one thing was all the while uppermost in my mind, and this was, that Nell Gibson had betrayed us."

"There's no doubt of it," exclaimed Bencull, savagely. "And now what's to be done?"

"What's to be done?" thundered the Hangman, starting from his seat and striking his fist with tremendous violence upon the table. "Why, if we were all to hang for it to-morrow morning, Nell Gibson must die to-night!" and as he glared around with his ferocious eyes upon his companions, he read assent in all their sinister countenances.

"That is to say," observed the Buttoner, "if we can find her; but my idea is that she's cut and run."

"Not she," exclaimed the Hangman. "You don't even know the girl so well as I do. She's not one to bolt like a coward; what she does, she'll stand by. Besides, didn't you tell me that Larry spoke of her just as if she hadn't peached at all?"

"Yes," observed the Buttoner, "but that was his gammon. No one could have told him about the fire at the baronet's except Nell Gibson; and therefore she put him up to our present plot also."

"I know all that very well," exclaimed the Hangman, "but what I mean is simple enough. There's no doubt that Nell Gibson has peached against us, and it's also clear that Larry has promised not to tell that he had his information from her. This is the reason why he didn't have us all taken up: because Nell Gibson's testimony could alone bring home the fire to three of us, and this night's plot to us all. Well, then, since it's clear that Larry Sampson has been bound

over to secrecy by Nell, she herself will fancy that she can brave it out before us. She is a bold girl, and I'll lay my life that she's neither run away nor even thought of it, but that you will find her at Mother Young's."

"Well, I'll go and see," said the Buttoner. "But if so be she won't come down here, what am I to do?"

"Knock her on the head at once," rejoined the Hangman, brutally, "and then cut and run, at all risks."

"Wery good," said the Buttoner; and forcing his hat down upon his head with an air of determination, he issued from the dark crib.

CHAPTER IV

THE MURDER

It was now one o'clock in the morning; but Mrs. Young's establishment was not one of those where very good hours were kept, and on arriving there the Buttoner found Nell Gibson and three or four other young women sitting up and drinking brandy together.

The instant the man thus made his appearance Nell Gibson threw upon him a look of significant inquiry, as much as to ask what had been done and whether the plot had succeeded; for, as the reader will bear in mind, she was in reality very far from being the authoress of the betrayal of that plot to Larry Sampson, and she was therefore totally ignorant of all that had taken place since she left the dark crib three hours previously.

But the Buttoner of course fancied that this look of inquiry was only a pretence on Nell's part in order to avert suspicion from herself, or else defy it with a brazen face; and therefore putting on a good-humoured look, as if he did not suspect her at all, he beckoned her to come out of the room. The young woman had not the slightest reason to refuse; on the contrary, she was most anxious to learn what had taken place, and supposing that her flash man now summoned her away to converse somewhere else without the danger of being overheard, she unhesitatingly rose from her seat, threw on her bonnet and cloak, and prepared to accompany him.

In the passage they encountered Mother Franklin, who had evidently been paying her respects to a bottle of strong waters, for she was now reeling about in a horrible state of ebriety. A tipsy woman is at all times a shocking spectacle, but this old hag of nearly ninety, with her bleared eyes now

red as if they were raw, her toothless jaws wagging as if with a palsy, and her cracked voice giving utterance to mingled imprecations and obscenities, was altogether one of the most hideous objects that can possibly be conceived.

"That drunken old witch had a holiday this evening," said Nell Gibson, who, accustomed though she was to behold female depravity at all ages and in all its varied phases, was nevertheless ineffably disgusted at the appearance of Mother Franklin. "Yes, she has had a holiday, and you see she has made the best of it."

"Ah! would you insult me?" yelled forth Mother Franklin, applying a vile epithet to the young woman. "But never mind! I dare say —"

"What is that you are muttering to yourself, you wretch?" exclaimed Nell Gibson, turning around toward the old woman with eyes flashing fire.

"You'll know, you'll know soon enough," responded the harridan, still muttering, in a scarcely audible tone, as she reeled toward the staircase to ascend to her own chamber.

Nell Gibson turned in deep disgust away, and followed the Buttoner from the house.

"Now, what has happened?" she inquired, the moment they were in the street together.

"I mustn't tell yer till we get down to the dark crib," said the Buttoner, "and then you'll know all."

The tone in which he spoke was low, deep, and ominous, and therefore Nell Gibson naturally inferred that the deed had been done and that Larry Sampson was murdered. No misgiving as to anything else entered her mind, and not for a moment could she conceive that the plot had failed and that the most terrible suspicions existed against herself. That the Buttoner would not tell her more nor enter into the slightest particulars in the street seemed but a proper precaution; and the only circumstance that struck her as being at all singular was that she should be fetched down to the dark crib at that hour.

"What am I wanted for at Bencull's?" she therefore asked, as she and the Buttoner proceeded rapidly toward Jacob's Island.

"Don't ask me a single question now," he replied, in a hurried and even tremulous voice; for, vile and criminal as he was, he could not contemplate with utter indifference

the murder of that fine young woman who was now leaning on his arm.

They continued their way in silence, and in a few minutes reached the dark crib. Bencull opened the street door, and the moment Nell Gibson entered the back room, she perceived by the looks of the Hangman, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker that something was ominously amiss. Turning toward the Buttoner for an explanation, she saw that the expression of his countenance was dogged and sombre as if marked with the iron impress of some stern resolve; and then as her glance, now keen with augmenting terror, travelled to the features of Bencull as he came in last and closed the room door behind him, she read her doom, as it were, in the looks of that dreadful man.

But not choosing to anticipate any evil, — and indeed utterly unable to conjecture whence it could spring so as to assume an aspect at all menacing toward herself, — she said, in that tone of inquiry which an accomplice adopts when demanding an explanation as a right, " Now will you tell me what has been the result of this night's enterprise? "

" 'Tis for you to tell us what Larry Sampson gave you for betraying the plot! " exclaimed the Hangman, in a voice of thunder, as he turned his ferocious looks full upon the now really dismayed and startled young woman.

" Yes, how much did you get? " demanded Bencull, with equal ferocity of voice and look.

" Whatever may have happened, I did not betray you — I swear that I did not! " said Nell Gibson, now recovering somewhat of her presence of mind, while indignation deepened the colour upon her cheeks to the ruddiest glow.

" I knew she would deny it," said the Hangman, his eyes literally glowing upon her. " Why, you she-devil! Larry Sampson has not only balked us and had the laugh at us, but he also knew that me, Bencull, and the Buttoner was the chaps that did the business t'other night at the baronet's — "

" Yes, and he knowed all about Coffin's intending to go and get the great book," added Bencull, with such a concentrated ferocity that his voice sounded like the subdued roar of a wild beast.

" I am innocent of all this," said Nell Gibson, her presence of mind rapidly failing.

"You lie!" thundered the Hangman. "We are certain that you have betrayed us. Who else could have done it? Besides, we know more of your nasty sneaking tricks than you fancy."

"Yes, look here," suddenly cried the Buttoner, producing Nell Gibson's own letter to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, — that letter which she had penned at Meg Blowen's, and which her paramour had subsequently obtained from the boy to whom she had entrusted it for delivery.

"Ah!" she ejaculated, becoming pale as death, for she saw that her doom was inevitable; and now, though she tried to speak, the words stuck in her throat, and terror subdued all further power of utterance.

"You see she's guilty — there's no doubt of it!" said the Hangman; and suddenly flinging off his coat, he actually tucked up his shirt-sleeves in order more effectually to do the work of death.

At the same instant Bencull threw a silk handkerchief around Nell Gibson's neck, and placing his hand forcibly over her mouth, he prevented her from screaming. The other ruffians, not even excepting the Buttoner, now flew upon her like so many wild beasts upon their prey, and while some held her hands and feet, the others tugged hard at the handkerchief in order to strangle her. She struggled desperately, though in the iron grasp of those strong men. Her cloak and bonnet were torn off, and her hair streamed down in wild disorder. Hard, hard did she fight against death; fearful was the convulsive tenacity with which the unfortunate girl clung to life. But gradually those strong spasmodic struggles grew weaker and weaker, and in a few more instants all was over.

The villains might have despatched her more speedily by the pistol, the knife, or the bludgeon, but they were afraid of exciting the attention of the neighbours by the report of firearms, and they were equally careful of spilling blood, which would leave its traces upon the floor, — inasmuch as the attention of Mr. Lawrence Sampson had now evidently become fixed upon the dark crib.

But the work of murder was effectually done by means of strangulation; and when the appalling deed was accomplished the Buttoner suddenly burst into tears and cried like a child.

"What the devil is the meaning of this blubbering?" demanded the Hangman, with a terrible imprecation.

"It's nothink — on'y a sort of nervous fit that I can't help for the moment," whimpered the Buttoner. "There, take her away, take her away! Don't let her stare up at me with those eyes that are fixed and dull as if made of glass! Take her away, I say!" and the strong man shuddered from head to foot with hysterical convulsions.

"You two look to him," growled the Hangman, addressing the command to the Mushroom Faker and Bob the Durry-nacker. "Come along, Bencull; you and me must do the rest of the work betwixt us."

"To be sure," responded Bencull, raising the corpse by the legs while Daniel Coffin lifted it by the shoulders. "Now then, come quick, out of this here door — there — that's right!"

And the two men emerged into the little gallery behind the house, bearing the dead body between them in the manner just described.

"Now let's lower it down gently, Ben," said the Hangman, "so as not to make a splash. There's nobody about to see what's going on."

Nobody to see! Ah, the insensate wretch! the eye of God was upon him, fixed on that scene of murder; and yet, because there was no candle at any neighbouring window, and because not a human soul was visible either on the opposite side of the ditch or on the bridges, the ruthless murderers fancied that no eye was upon them as they lowered the corpse into the stagnant dike.

The light of the silver crescent moon shone upon this last act in the terrible drama; and as Bencull and the Hangman thus let down their victim into the slimy grave, there was a moment, as she hung over the wooden parapet ere they let go the handkerchief that they held in their grasp, a moment, we say, at which the pure lustre of the planet of the night fell powerfully upon the countenance of the unfortunate young woman, showing in their distorted ghastliness those features that were so recently full of animation and even beauty. For a moment also did that moonlight delineate the form that was so finely modelled, but which now hung in the dread abandonment of death.

Terrible indeed was every detail of the tremendous

tragedy of this awful night; but in another moment all was over. The corpse was lowered down into its black sepulchre of slime, and the dark muddy waters closed with but a sluggish ripple above it.

CHAPTER V

THE TOKENS

We must once more transport our readers to Paris, — that peerless city which not only sets the fashions for the fair sex, but also affords the example of revolutionary glory to all the nations that are downtrampled and enslaved.

Three weeks had elapsed since that memorable night on which Julia Owen, under the name of Laura Linden, had brought all the artillery of her wiles and intrigues, her witcheries and her blandishments, to bear upon Jocelyn Loftus in the prison department of the prefecture of police.

The reader will recollect that it was an accident which revealed to Jocelyn the identity of the false Laura Linden with the depraved though lovely Julia Owen, and that this sudden discovery was followed by earnest remonstrances on the part of the young gentleman and impassioned entreaties on that of the young lady. Indeed, in the enthusiasm to which she worked herself up and with which her maddening desires helped to animate her, Julia had threatened to commit suicide unless Jocelyn would consent to crown her hopes and minister to her sensual cravings. Then was it that, in a tone of mingled remonstrance and despair, he exclaimed, " Oh, you will drive me mad, you will drive me mad! " to which the infatuated Julia responded, with all the fervour of devouring passion, " Oh, Jocelyn, dear Jocelyn, thou knowest that I love thee! " That same instant Louisa Stanley was alike a listener and a spectatress, and the scream which thrilled from her lips penetrated through Jocelyn's brain. By the aid of the lamp he looked through the aperture in the partition wall, and on recognizing his Louisa, a cry of rage and madness burst from him. All in a moment did he understand what must have been the impression

produced upon the mind of his well-beloved, and while levelling the bitterest reproaches against Julia Owen, he fell down insensible.

All these particulars have we thus rapidly recapitulated in order to refresh the memory of the reader. We may now add that when Jocelyn returned to consciousness, he found a physician and a nurse seated by his bedside; and on inquiry he learned that for ten days he had been ill with a delirious fever.

Ten days, and how much might have happened in that time! His Louisa had doubtless renounced him for ever, and thus were his fondest, dearest, brightest hopes destroyed beyond redemption. No, not beyond redemption; for he could explain to Louisa all that had occurred, he could show her how he had been made a victim instead of wilfully becoming a criminal. Yes; but by what means was he to communicate with her? For he was still a prisoner, still subjected to all the rigours of that seclusion to which he had been consigned from the first moment of his arrest.

He appealed to the physician for leave to send to the post a letter which he wished to write; but the medical man, too independent if not too honest to deceive him with false representations, at once declared that he had no authority in the matter. Jocelyn then sent to demand an interview with the prefect, and this functionary at once acceded to the young gentleman's request and repaired to his chamber. The physician and nurse withdrew, and when Jocelyn was alone with the prefect, he demanded an explanation of what had occurred, — how Julia Owen had been his neighbour, and how Miss Louisa Stanley had been brought to the prefecture. To these queries the prefect, however, declined giving an answer; and Jocelyn therefore remained in torturing suspense as to the circumstances which had arisen or the influences that had been exercised in order to place Louisa in a position to form the most erroneous and the most fatal opinion of his fidelity and honour. Finding that the prefect would not give him any explanations on those heads, Jocelyn asked whether he might be permitted to communicate with his friends. The reply was exactly that which he had anticipated, namely, a negative, decisive enough though couched in the most courteous terms. He next demanded how long he was to be retained a prisoner, and

thereupon the prefect addressed him in the following manner:

"In expectation of your convalescence, and naturally supposing that you would wish to put a term to your imprisonment, those who at present rule your destinies have prepared this bond, which you must sign; and I am instructed, upon receiving your signature, after you shall have duly perused and considered it, to grant you your freedom."

"My freedom!" ejaculated Loftus. "And immediately, too?" he asked, raising himself up in his couch and looking eagerly at the prefect.

"Yes, this very day if you choose," replied the functionary. "It is now two o'clock in the afternoon," he added, consulting his watch, "and there is not the slightest reason wherefore you should not be comfortably installed at one of our gay Parisian hotels ere sunset."

"Oh, but I am so weak, so feeble, so ill!" murmured Loftus, sinking back upon the pillow.

"Change of air and a sense of freedom will speedily restore you to health," said the prefect.

"Give me the bond," cried Loftus, stretching out his hand. "Let me see what it contains. And yet," he observed, abruptly checking the eagerness of his manner, while a dark cloud fell as suddenly upon his features, "it is useless — I know beforehand it is useless! That bond doubtless stipulates conditions which I cannot in honour fulfil."

"Then will you remain a captive all your life?" asked the prefect, significantly.

"Heavens! can such an atrocity be contemplated toward me?" exclaimed Jocelyn, in mingled astonishment and terror.

"You must understand," said the prefect, "that inasmuch as the individuals whom your conduct has converted into enemies are possessed of power illimitable, so will their persecution of you be pitiless if you persist in thwarting or interfering with their designs. Believe me, young man, it is a somewhat dangerous thing to obey the impulses of a maudlin chivalry, a sickly sentimentalism, or a false honour — "

"Silence, sir!" exclaimed Loftus, with a mingled dignity and sternness, as the excitement of his soul animated him with the strength to raise himself up once more to a sitting posture in the couch. "You are calumniating all the finest

feelings that belong to our nature. Because I have vowed to frustrate the schemes which are in progress to accomplish the ruin of a persecuted and injured princess, — for that this is the cause of my imprisonment I can, of course, full well conceive — "

"Let us not bandy words," interrupted the prefect. "The means of liberty are within your reach; and at all events there will be no harm in your perusing the bond," he added, drawing a parchment from his pocket.

Loftus took the deed, opened it, and endeavoured to read its contents. But only a few hours had elapsed since he had awakened to consciousness from the protracted delirium of fever, and a mist was still upon his eyes, so that he could not concentrate the powers of vision upon minute points. Dropping the document from his hand and sinking back upon the pillow, he said, in a bitter tone, "I cannot read it; and even if I could, I am persuaded it would be useless."

"Nevertheless, permit me," exclaimed the prefect, "to describe the leading points in the bond." Then, perceiving that Jocelyn offered no objection, he continued to say, "The first stipulation is to the effect that you solemnly and sacredly pledge yourself to bury in oblivion all the information you may ever have received relative to the mission of the Misses Owen and their appointment to situations about the person of her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales. Secondly, you renounce all idea of forming so unequal a match as that which you have contemplated in respect to Miss Louisa Stanley. Thirdly, you resume before the world your proper name, and make due submission to — "

"Enough, enough!" cried Jocelyn Loftus, the flush of indignation appearing upon his countenance, a moment before so pale. "Were your infamous Bastile still in existence, I would sooner be consigned to eternal immurement in one of its living tombs than assent to the terms contained in that document. And now I can full well understand from what quarter emanate these persecutions. But, O God!" he exclaimed, an expression of sudden agony passing over his countenance as a thought struck him, "grant that poor Louisa fall not into the meshes and toils — "

The remainder of the sentence was lost in a suffocating sob which burst from Jocelyn's lips, and for two or three

minutes he was almost completely unmanned by the violence of his emotions. Weakened and enfeebled as he was by illness, it cannot be wondered if his mind were sympathetically attenuated, and that his feelings should for a space triumph over his habitual fortitude.

"No, it is not a Bastile which you have to dread," observed the prefect, after a pause, "but if you still continue obstinate —"

"You mean," interrupted Loftus, bitterly, "if I still continue to spurn proposals alike dishonourable and tyrannical to a degree —"

"Well, we will not dispute as to words," resumed the prefect, rising from the seat which he had taken by the young gentleman's bedside, "but perhaps you will understand me when I state that if we have no Bastiles, yet we have madhouses; and should you persevere in your present course —"

"Enough, enough!" ejaculated Loftus, all his wonted fortitude now returning to his aid. "You may consign me to a lunatic asylum on pretences as base as those which have made me a prisoner at the prefecture; but all the diabolical tyranny of the mad-doctor, and all the coercion of the strait-waistcoat, the barred chamber, the iron chains, and the ferocious keeper, will not prove more effective with me than the persuasion of his Excellency the Prefect of Police."

And as Jocelyn Loftus gave utterance to these words, he surveyed the French functionary with a calm but noble dignity which was more impressive than an angry defiance would have been.

"Then you refuse your signature to this bond?" said the prefect, moving toward the door.

"I do," was the firm reply. "And now, before you leave me, sir, let me remark that the day will come when you may perhaps repent of your conduct toward one who never injured you. Indeed, if there be a spark of generous feeling in your nature, if you have aught of that chivalry in your soul for which your nation is so justly famed, you must shrink from the unworthy position which you are occupying, namely, that of the despots' tool. No honourable man would consent to be the gaoler of an innocent person under such circumstances."

The prefect of police made no reply to this language of rebuke and remonstrance uttered with dignity rather than with passion; but waiting until Jocelyn had ceased, his Excellency merely bowed and then quitted the room, to which the physician and the nurse soon afterward returned.

A week now passed away, thus making up the three weeks which at the commencement of this chapter we stated to have elapsed since the memorable night of Julia Owen's adventures. During those seven days which thus succeeded the interview with the prefect, Jocelyn Loftus became pretty well restored to health. But his mind remained a prey to cruel misgivings and incessant anxieties.

That the Marquis of Leveson had interfered in his affairs, he had not the slightest doubt. In the first place, it was the marquis who had been instrumental in nominating the Owens to their present mission; in the second place, he was interested for his own reputation's sake in preventing any exposure of the conspiracy thus in progress against the Princess of Wales; and, thirdly, it was perfectly intelligible to Jocelyn wherefore the marquis sought to prevent his union with an obscure and portionless girl such as Louisa Stanley. Arguing, therefore, from all these circumstances that Lord Leveson had been busily engaged against him, Jocelyn was fearful that the marquis might by some means or other have gained the confidence of Louisa; and although the young lover had too sublime a faith in the purity and chastity of the damsel's soul to imagine for an instant that she would lend an ear to any overtures which the veteran debauchee might choose to make, yet knowing full well how unprincipled and unscrupulous was the character of that nobleman, Jocelyn could not help fearing for Louisa as one may tremble for the lamb in the power of the wolf.

Thus did the week following the interview with the prefect pass unhappily enough for Jocelyn Loftus; but still he was determined to endure any amount of persecution and undergo any extent of adversity rather than submit to the terms dictated by his enemies.

At the end of the week the physician pronounced his patient to be so far recovered as not to require his services any longer. Jocelyn saw that it was of no use to endeavour to interest the medical man in his behalf; for though full of that courtesy which seems innate with every Frenchman,

he was nevertheless evidently a mere tool of the prefect. Loftus therefore contented himself with thanking the physician for his attentions, and the medical man then took his leave.

But the nurse still remained. She was a Frenchwoman of about sixty, taciturn, and reserved, but keen and shrewd, and with that kind of sharp, angular countenance which denotes extreme artfulness and duplicity. Hitherto she had never addressed a word to Loftus save in fulfilment of her ministering duties as a nurse; but the moment the physician had taken his departure she suddenly assumed a look of deep significancy, as if encouraging Jocelyn to question her.

"And are your services likewise to cease?" he asked, addressing her, of course, in the French tongue.

"That depends upon you, sir," she immediately answered, "and if you are wise you will send a note to the prefect desiring that I may be allowed to remain in attendance upon you a few days more. Should he hesitate, you must pretend to suffer a relapse, so that it may become a matter of apparent necessity for me to stay. His Excellency has the utmost faith in me. I have been attached to the establishment for the last twenty years, and he does not think me capable of abusing his confidence."

Jocelyn had listened in mingled amazement and hope to this speech, which the old nurse delivered in a cautious whisper; but after the conduct of the charwoman in becoming the agent of Julia Owen's manœuvres, and considering also those manœuvres themselves, Loftus was resolved not to be hasty in putting faith in anybody belonging to the prefecture.

"What am I to understand from all that you have just told me?" he inquired, looking her full in the face.

"That I am anxious and able to serve you," she immediately answered, "if you choose to be served by me."

"But to what end?" asked Jocelyn, "and in what manner?"

"I suppose an escape is the end aimed at," she returned, "but as to the plan to be adopted, I know nought of it."

"Tell me what you meant by the way in which you addressed me just now," said Jocelyn, resolved to hear more ere he committed himself in any manner. "For during the past week, indeed, since the delirium left me, you have

been for hours and hours alone with me in this room, during the intervals between the doctor's visits, and not once have you spoken a single cheering word, nor thrown aside your chill reserve; far less have you given any indication of anxiety or willingness to obtain my confidence."

"Because," rejoined the nurse, "nothing transpired in your favour outside these walls until to-day."

"And what has happened at length, then?" asked Jocelyn, every nerve and fibre thrilling with uncertainty and suspense.

"When I went out an hour ago, to procure some jelly for you at the pastry-cook's," said the old nurse, "I was accosted by a gentleman who asked me if I belonged to the prefecture, as he saw me issue forth from the building with a small market-basket hanging to my arm. I answered in the affirmative; and pulling a handful of gold out of his pocket as a sign that he was able and willing to recompense, he besought me to give him a few minutes' private conversation. I told him to follow me to the pastry-cook's; and on arriving there, we went into an inner room, where we sat down to discourse. The gentleman — who, by the bye, I should have said is an Englishman, although he speaks French as well as you do, sir — put twenty pieces of gold into my hand and asked me if I would accept the sum as an earnest of what he was disposed to give if I could and would serve him. To convince you, sir, that I am telling the truth," added the nurse, "here are the twenty pieces that he gave me, — all in guineas, as I think you call them in your language," and she displayed the coin as she spoke.

"Well, I certainly see that you have twenty good golden guineas," said Jocelyn, his heart beating high with hope notwithstanding his endeavour to put a bridle upon his credulity. "Pray proceed."

"The English gentleman, after a great many questions," continued the nurse, "evidently for the purpose of testing my good faith, came to the point at length by asking me whether I knew any prisoner of your name."

"What name?" asked our hero.

"Jocelyn Loftus," returned the old nurse, "for although I know, sir, that it is not your right name, yet I am not aware what your right one really is. The Englishman, however, of whom I am speaking, mentioned you by the name which you bear here; and in reply to his question I told him not

only that I knew you, but that I was actually appointed by the prefect to wait upon you. At these tidings he was perfectly overjoyed; but with a reasonable regard for caution, he would say nothing more unless I took him back from you some token to prove that you believed me to be trustworthy. And that you may be enabled to do this if you choose, I have brought a token from the Englishman."

"Give it to me," exclaimed Loftus, now utterly unable to subdue or conceal his eagerness; and clutching at a scrap of paper which the old woman handed him, he hastily read the following lines:

"Clara Stanley has seen her sister Louisa, who is safe. This is a token that you have friends outside. Send a token to prove that the bearer may be trusted."

A fervid joy now flamed up in Jocelyn's eyes and glowed upon his countenance, for a thousand thrilling and ecstatic ideas swept through his brain. Louisa was safe, and Clara had seen her since the adventure in Paris. But were the sisters now interesting themselves by means of some trusty agent to effect his liberation? And if so, was it not a proof that his well-beloved still cherished his image, was still devoted to him? And if she still clung to his memory and still considered herself his betrothed, was it not an evidence that she no longer believed him unfaithful? And did it not appear as if the wheel of fortune had begun to turn in his favour?

Such was the first gush of delicious thoughts that were excited by that scrap of paper; but now came the more serious reflection: was he to put faith in this seeming token, or was it the first step in some new intrigue to destroy him?

"Describe to me the person of this Englishman whom you have met," he said, once more resuming a tone of caution and a look of reserve.

"Rather stout, of middle height, and about forty," returned the nurse, "great black whiskers and mustachios, red face and fierce-looking, dressed in a military style, and carries a great stick with a large knob."

"I have not the slightest idea who he is," observed Loftus, thinking that the description was much more suitable to a Frenchman than to an Englishman; and again he hesitated as to the amount of reliance he ought to place upon the old woman's tale.

But still he saw not how the token sent to him could possibly form a link in any chain of contemplated treachery, and much less could he understand how he should be compromising himself by sending some sign in reply. Besides, where nothing was risked nothing would be gained; and if he indeed had friends outside, it was his duty to acknowledge their good intentions and do all he could to further them. Therefore, without any more hesitation, he at once wrote on the back of the slip of paper the following words:

"Has Miss Louisa returned to Canterbury, or is she with her sister in Stratton Street, London?"

"When are you to meet the Englishman again?" he asked, as he handed the scrap of paper back to the old nurse.

"This evening at seven o'clock," was the response. "But in the meantime, do you write to the prefect and solicit that I shall remain in attendance upon you."

Loftus hastened to comply with this suggestion; and in the course of an hour he received a written answer from the prefect, couched in the following terms:

"Cabinet of the Prefecture of Police,
"November 24, 1814.

"Sir:—I beg to inform you that I have received your note, and in reply thereto have to state that the attentions of the nurse shall be continued toward you so long as you remain a prisoner in the prefecture. But the medical attendant has this day reported your complete recovery; and I have therefore to inform you that, according to the instructions which I have received, you must prepare for removal to another place in the course of two or three days, unless you assent to those terms which may at once empower me to restore you to liberty.

"I have the honour to salute you,
"The Prefect of Police."

Jocelyn read this note to the old nurse, watching her countenance as he did so; but he could not discover in her looks anything to make him suspect that she was playing him false or was privy to any new plot initiated against him. He now therefore anxiously awaited the result of her next interview with the Englishman, and as seven o'clock approached, his excitement rose to the highest degree. At

length she took her departure, and after an absence of more than an hour she made her appearance again in the prison-chamber.

"I have seen the Englishman," she said, "and I gave him back the scrap of paper on which you had written something, which evidently satisfied him that I was trustworthy. He thereupon took me in a hackney-coach to a house in the Rue du Bac, and in a handsome apartment on the first floor I was introduced to an elderly gentleman with a great brown wig, red whiskers, and a very good set of teeth. He is also an Englishman. A few words passed between him and the gentleman who had brought me hither, but as they spoke in English I did not understand what they said. I however perceived that the one with the black whiskers and mustachios was called Captain."

"I cannot think who they can be," said Jocelyn. "But pray go on."

"The gentleman with the brown wig and red whiskers desired me to sit down, and he then proceeded to put all kinds of questions concerning the prefecture, — its internal arrangements, the distribution of the buildings, the manner in which they are guarded, and the exact position of your chamber. To all these queries," continued the nurse, "I gave the fullest and most faithful particulars. Indeed, being well aware for what motive I was thus interrogated, I told the two gentlemen that it would be madness to dream of effecting your escape either by force or stratagem, so long as the prefecture remained your prison. Struck by this last observation of mine, they asked what I meant, and I proceeded to explain that this very afternoon you had received a letter from the prefect intimating that you were shortly to be removed elsewhere. This statement seemed to give a new impulse to the thoughts of your English friends, and after conversing together for a short time in their own language, the Captain penned a few hasty lines which he bade me give you."

With these words the old woman handed Loftus a note, the contents of which he eagerly perused, and which ran as follows:

"The few words you sent just now have been regarded as a token that the bearer is fully trustworthy. Being unac-

quainted with your handwriting, it was necessary to receive from you some proof that the little billet was really delivered to you yourself, instead of being placed in the hands of your gaolers. The words you wrote back could not well have been forged by any official of the prefecture, inasmuch as they involve questions which none but you would have been likely to put; and therefore we received them as a token that the first little missive really reached you. It now appears that you are soon to be removed. You must ascertain, if possible, when this removal will take place, and whither you are going. But if you cannot glean these particulars, you need not despair. We shall maintain a constant watch, as we are pledged to accomplish our aim.

"Miss Louisa Stanley has returned to her residence at Canterbury, having escaped from many perils. We are enabled to assure you that nothing which your enemies have devised or done has in any way impaired her full confidence in you.

"YOUR FRIENDS OUTSIDE."

The joy, the supreme, ineffable joy, which Loftus experienced on perusing the latter part of the letter so transcended all the previous satisfaction which he felt at the prospects of escape held out by the preceding portion, that he for a few minutes forgot everything save the one grand fact that his Louisa loved him as fondly as ever. The assurance thus conveyed seemed to inspire him with new life; hope lit up its flaming beacon before his eyes, and again did he whisper to himself that the wheel of fortune was turning in his favour.

But when the first gush of ecstatic feelings had thus found a vent, he was enabled to revert with befitting seriousness and deliberation to the measures that were in progress for his escape. To solicit another interview with the prefect was the only way to obtain the information which his friends outside requested him to procure, namely, the time fixed for his removal, and the place to which he was to be removed; but as it was now nine o'clock in the evening he considered it best to postpone the demand for that interview with the prefect until the following morning. Dismissing the nurse, therefore, for the night, he remained alone to meditate upon his prospects, his hopes, and his love.

After breakfast next morning he was about to pen a note to the prefect when the door opened and that functionary entered the room. The old nurse immediately withdrew, and the moment she had retired, the prefect addressed himself to Jocelyn in the following manner:

"By this morning's post I have received a letter from London. It is to the effect that from something which has transpired within the last week or ten days it is deemed expedient no longer to insist upon that clause in the bond which forbids your alliance with Miss Louisa Stanley."

"Ah!" ejaculated Loftus, in astonishment, "what could have transpired to have produced this change of opinion upon that point? Your Excellency can surely speak with more openness and less enigma than heretofore. Indeed, I know full well that the Marquis of Leveson is at the bottom of all this."

"Well, then," observed the prefect, hastily, "it does appear from the letter I have received this morning that his lordship has learned something which has induced him to alter his mind very materially concerning this matrimonial project of yours. But whether it be that Miss Louisa Stanley turns out to be more highly connected than he had at first supposed, or whether she has suddenly proved the heiress to a fortune, I am of course utterly unable to conjecture. Suffice it for you to know that this particular clause in the bond is withdrawn; and I will take it upon myself to erase the stipulation which requires your submission and obedience to the Marquis of Leveson. It now therefore only remains for you to sign your assent to that clause which sacredly and solemnly pledges you to abstain from any interference in the affairs of the Princess of Wales, to bury in oblivion all that you may have ever learned upon that subject, and to pursue your future career as if no such details had ever come to your knowledge."

"I have listened to your Excellency with varied feelings of interest," said Jocelyn, in a firm and deliberate tone. "That an assent should now be given to my union with Miss Louisa Stanley is so far agreeable inasmuch as it can only be a tribute of admiration and respect accorded to her beauty and her virtues; for that she has suddenly discovered any high connections or become possessed of a fortune I do

not for a moment believe. The clause relative to my submission to the Marquis of Leveson could indeed be well dispensed with, for reasons which I need not explain. But as for that clause which is to remain and which I am to be called upon to sign, were I to purchase my freedom on such terms, never should I dare venture into the presence of Louisa Stanley again. When first I set out upon this enterprise, she encouraged me to pursue it, and with all the generosity of her nature did she appreciate the duty which circumstances thus imposed upon me. She felt for the injured princess, not because she is a princess, but because she is a woman, a wronged and injured woman, and she would regard me as a coward, a base recreant, were I now, in a moment of weakness or folly, to abandon the cause of that persecuted lady."

The prefect exerted all his eloquence to remonstrate, persuade, and cajole, in order to induce Jocelyn to sign the bond, now cut down to a single clause; but not even to this one clause would the young man append his name. At length, tired of his unavailing endeavours to alter the prisoner's decision, the prefect said, "Then, if you are bent upon this obstinacy, I have no alternative but to follow out the instructions which I have received."

"And those instructions?" said Loftus, interrogatively.

"To treat you as a lunatic," responded the prefect, "and remove you to an asylum for the insane. To-morrow night, therefore, at eleven o'clock, will you be transferred hence, unless in the interval you yield to the dictates of reason and prudence."

Having thus spoken, his Excellency hastened from the room, and soon afterward the old nurse returned. Jocelyn now penned the following note:

"To my Friends Outside:—Whoever ye are, accept my sincerest and most heartfelt thanks. Your note duly reached me, and as a further token that it is really I, the undersigned, who am thus corresponding with you, permit me to ask whether Miss Clara Stanley is still residing with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford in Stratton Street, Piccadilly? The time of my removal is fixed for to-morrow night at eleven, and my destiny is a madhouse, but where situated I know

not. This point I could not ascertain, nor is there any chance of discovering it. I have not the slightest doubt that the old woman is fully trustworthy.

"Jocelyn Loftus."

But scarcely had our hero penned the last words of his note when the thought suddenly struck him, with the dismaying effect of a lightning flash, that although the nurse brought the notes to him and carried his own to the friends outside, yet that it was quite possible for her to submit the whole correspondence to the prefect as it passed through her hands.

This idea had not struck him before, and his heart now sank within him. He glanced up from the paper on which he had just been writing, and encountered the looks of the woman as they were fixed upon him; but there was nothing troubled in the manner in which she met his gaze. On the contrary, she evidently perceived that some misgiving had suddenly entered his mind, and in a calm, unruffled tone she said, "I cannot convince you, sir, of my fidelity; but, after all, what risk do you run by trusting me? If I really am faithful, well and good; but if, on the other hand, I am all the while betraying you to the prefect, what alteration can it make in the circumstances of your position? You are not like a murderer or a felon, on whom heavy irons are put when he attempts to escape."

The truth of these observations forcibly struck Jocelyn Loftus; and even if he were not thoroughly convinced of the old woman's fidelity, he at all events resolved to allow the matter to take its course. But to the note which he had just penned, he added the words, "Nevertheless, use the utmost caution."

The old nurse presently sallied forth with this letter; and in about an hour she returned, bearing a written reply which ran as follows:

"Your note is received, and in pursuance of your recommendation to use caution, we shall not commit any of our plans to paper. Suffice it to say that we are neither inactive nor irresolute. Miss Clara Stanley was residing in Stratton Street when we left London, a few days ago.

"Your Friends Outside."

" P. S. Unless anything of importance should transpire, — such, for instance, as the postponement of your removal, — it will not be necessary for any further communication to take place between us. We have given the old woman a hundred guineas."

It can scarcely be necessary to inform our readers that the remainder of this day and the whole of the next passed amidst much anxiety and torturing suspense. At one moment Jocelyn was buoyed up with exulting hope, feeling confident in the success of the plans, whatever they were, which his friends outside were conducting; at another moment his spirits drooped, as a bird plunges down from the loftiest clouds into the lowest abysses of some yawning gulf, and he fancied that he was betrayed. As the hour approached for his removal from the prefecture, the restlessness of his spirit amounted to a positive excruciation, and he felt the blood coursing at a fever-pace in its crimson channels.

CHAPTER VI

THE JOURNEY

At ten o'clock on the night fixed for Jocelyn's departure the prefect visited him, and made a last effort to induce him to sign the bond.

"You see," observed his Excellency, "what a high opinion even your very enemies have of your honour and integrity, since they are willing to permit you to go at large in the world the possessor of all their most important secrets, with no other guarantee than your simple written pledge that you will not reveal them."

"Yes," said Jocelyn, bitterly, "they first attempted to destroy every sentiment of virtue and paralyze every impulse of honour within my breast, — for that this was the aim in subjecting me to the seductive wiles of the temptress Julia Owen I cannot doubt. But having had so signal a proof that I prefer the approval of my conscience to all the blandishments of transient pleasure, and that I cherish honour as if it were a worship, my enemies, as you justly style them, are now willing to trust themselves to that integrity and that sense of rectitude which they have vainly endeavoured to subvert. They know that my pledge would be my bond, and that my written promise would never be falsified. But that pledge and that promise they will not obtain from me."

These words were uttered in so firm a tone that the prefect of police offered no further remonstrance and attempted no more persuasion, but coldly bowing to our young hero, he quitted the room. A few minutes afterward the old nurse entered to take leave of Jocelyn; and she spoke her farewells with an air of so much sincerity that all remaining suspicions with regard to her were banished from his mind.

A little before eleven Jocelyn was fetched from his room by a couple of gendarmes and conducted down to the court-yard, where a post-chaise and four appeared in readiness. The postilions were ready mounted, the lamps of the vehicle were lighted, and the moment Loftus entered, the door was banged and the equipage rolled at a rapid rate through the gloomy gate of the prefecture.

Inside the chaise Jocelyn found himself in the companionship of two individuals. One of them he speedily recognized, by the light which the street-lamps shed into the carriage, as the very same police-agent who had arrested him nearly two months back at the Hotel Meurice; the other was unknown to Jocelyn, but was no doubt likewise an official of the prefecture. Both were in plain clothes, and the first-mentioned one immediately addressed our hero in terms of politeness, to which a somewhat cold though sufficiently courteous response was given; but it was not to be supposed that Jocelyn could feel very well inclined to converse familiarly with any of the agents of that tyranny to which he was being subjected.

On emerging from the prefecture, the post-chaise rattled along the quays bordering the Seine, and turning into the central avenue of the Champs Elysées, took the road for St. Germain. While in the Champs Elysées, and indeed within the immediate precincts of the suburbs, there were so many vehicles hurrying in every direction that it was impossible to say whether any particular one was following the post-chaise; but when proceeding farther along the road and the open country was gained, Jocelyn listened anxiously for the sounds of any vehicle in pursuit. For if his English friends were not thus following, how was it possible that they could accomplish his rescue? Such was the question which he asked himself a dozen times during the first half-hour that elapsed after leaving the Parisian suburbs behind; but no sounds of any vehicle in pursuit reached his ears.

The weather was fine, clear, and frosty; the moon sat enthroned in silver splendour amidst the deep blue of the cloudless overarching sky, which was gemmed with myriads of stars, those chaste handmaids of the queen of night. The police-agents, finding that Jocelyn did not encourage them in conversation, soon sank into silence; but through

the semiobscurity which prevailed inside the vehicle, our hero could observe their eyes fixed upon him with the keenness of custodians whom no soothing influence could lull into slumber so long as a watch must be kept.

The journey had now lasted upwards of an hour, when suddenly a man on horseback, coming from behind, that is to say, from the direction of Paris, shot past the post-chaise with incredible speed.

"His horse has run away with him," observed one of the police-agents; and as he put down the window and looked forth, the movement of his body made his coat open somewhat, and Jocelyn observed that he had a pair of pistols secured about his person.

In about a couple of minutes after the horseman had galloped by with the meteor-like rapidity just described, another one, equally well mounted and proceeding at the same desperate rate, swept past the chaise, no sooner appearing than he was instantaneously out of sight.

"Hah! I should think they must be government expresses," observed the police-agent who was looking out at the window, "and yet they did not appear to have on the official uniform."

"It was impossible to tell at the rate they swept past," said the other police-agent. "They must be government couriers, or else the American ambassador's expresses bound for Havre."

But scarcely were these words spoken when a vehicle, built like the tall English phaeton then in vogue, drawn by two splendid horses, and containing three persons, also swept by the chaise in the same direction as the two horsemen, who from their fleetness might be taken for the outriders of that dashing equipage.

"Ah! at what a tremendous rate that vehicle is going," cried the police-agent who still had his head at the window. "I wonder what it can mean? Doubtless some of your madcap fellow countrymen, sir," he continued, addressing himself to Loftus, "for you Englishmen are desperate riders and drivers, and can make your horses do anything."

"Those travellers, whoever they may be, are indeed going very quick," said our hero, assuming a tone of the most perfect indifference, although a powerful excitement was really agitating in his breast, for a secret voice seemed to

"A SUDDEN ATTACK WAS MADE UPON THE EQUIPAGE"
Photograph from original by Warrin

"A SUDDEN ATTACK WAS MADE UPON THE EQUIPAGE"
Photogravure from original by Merrill.

whisper that those dashing horsemen and the occupants of the phaeton were the friends whose presence he had been so eagerly expecting upon the road.

Scarcely had he come to this conviction when the chaise entered the town of St. Germain, and there the horses were changed. The halt only occupied two or three minutes, and the vehicle proceeded on at a rapid rate. Half an hour elapsed, St. Germain was far behind, and the road now lay through a wood stretching far as the eye could reach on either side till lost in the gloom of distance. The moon still shone in unclouded splendour, shadowing forth the sombre appearance of the landscape, for not a human habitation was now to be seen. A presentiment sprang up in Jocelyn's mind that ere the wood was cleared something would be attempted by his friends; and as he leaned back in the seat, the two officers sitting opposite to him, he endeavoured through the obscurity to discover with straining looks the exact position in which the principal police-agent's pistols were secured at his waist, for our young hero was resolved, if any attack were made, to second as resolutely as he could inside the endeavours of his friends outside.

Rapidly along the level road, which ran straight as an arrow through the wood, proceeded the equipage. By the shadow which it threw upon the ground, in the powerful moonlight, Jocelyn could perceive that there were no guards or gendarmes seated outside the chaise. The two agents who occupied the interior along with him were therefore the only persons to contend against, for the postilions were sure not to be armed. Perceiving, therefore, that he was so slightly guarded, he felt assured that the old nurse had not betrayed to the prefect the proceedings of his friends, and that therefore such an eventuality as an attempt at rescue had never been dreamed of by the authorities.

Scarcely had Jocelyn revolved all these calculations in his own mind, when from the two branches of a cross-road a sudden attack was made upon the equipage. From the right hand and the left, simultaneously and with matchless energy, was the onslaught made by five determined persons. The postilions were instantaneously knocked from their horses; a foot was then placed on either breast and a pistol pointed at either head, accompanied with stern injunctions to remain quiet, "or their brains would be blown out."

One of the postilions was completely stunned by the fall, and with regard to him, therefore, the warning was unnecessary, but the other was less hurt, and in piteous tones he promised to remain quiet, imploring that his life would be spared.

At the same moment that the postilions were hurled to the ground by two of the assailants, the traces were cut by a third, and the horses at once stood still. Simultaneously also were both the doors of the chaise hastily torn open, and at each door appeared an individual thrusting pistols into the interior.

The sudden movement which the two police-agents made to tear open their coats and draw forth the weapons with which they were armed was instantaneously frustrated by Jocelyn, who threw himself with all his force upon them, and thus succeeded in encumbering and restraining their actions for a few moments, while the two individuals who appeared at the doors aided him in completely overpowering them. To drag them forth into the road, bind them with stout cords, take their weapons from them and toss them to a distance, — all this was now the work of a minute; and no sooner was it over when Jocelyn's friends hurried him along with them up one of the branches of the cross-road, where the two saddle-horses and the dashing phaeton appeared.

" Now away, with the speed of the whirlwind! " exclaimed one who seemed to be the leader of the party, and who by the hasty glance which Jocelyn threw upon him in the moonlight seemed to answer to the old nurse's description of the elderly gentleman with the brown wig and the red whiskers. " Up into the phaeton," he cried, seizing Loftus by the arm and literally thrusting him on to the front seat. " Now, Captain, where are you? "

" Here, my lord," instantaneously responded a stentorian voice; and the individual who thus spoke sprang at the same time upon the back of one of the saddle-horses. Then, in a still louder tone, he cried, " Robin? "

" Here, sir," was the reply; and the person who now spoke leaped up behind the phaeton, where another of the band also ensconced himself.

All was haste and bustle, but no confusion. The Captain, be it remembered, had mounted one saddle-horse; the other was at the same time bestridden by its owner. The

personage in the brown wig, and who had been addressed as "my lord," seized the reins of the phaeton and took his seat as driver, and then the whole cavalcade, consisting of saddle-horses and equipage, sped away at a tremendous rate.

CHAPTER VII

EDITHA

It was on the fifth evening after the incidents just related; and if we peep into the Countess of Curzon's boudoir between eight and nine o'clock, we shall observe her ladyship occupied with the elegant mysteries of the toilet. And yet the word mysteries scarcely applies in the present instance; for no need had Editha of cosmetics, sophistications, or adventitious appliances to enhance the natural splendour of her charms.

No succedaneous enamel was required for those pearly teeth that were without spot or blemish and which shone between the lips that were full and red as a luscious fruit of the tropics; no art could shed upon the cheeks the hue of a richer carnation than that which the warm blood itself gave in its mantling glow; no dye nor factitious confection could crown the dark hair with a brighter glory than its own purply glossiness. And though the complexion of this lady was of Oriental duskiness, yet would it have been a very folly and a shame to have endeavoured to mitigate its dark beauty by the appliance of aught whiter or make that skin fairer. For that soft and delicate tint of bronze, the softest and most delicate that can possibly be conceived, gave her the appearance of the warm Andalusian or glowing Italian, as if she were one of the impassioned daughters of the sunny south.

Her eyes, so dark and yet so full of living lustre, seemed like ebony condensing all the brilliancy of diamonds. As suns they appeared to burn those who gazed upon them, and as suns also did they seem as if worlds of bliss and realms of paradise lay concealed in the depths of their glory.

She had chosen for her evening toilet a rich satin dress of

a shining amber colour, and which seemed to array her in the brightness of a robe made of golden tissue. The low body left her polished shoulders entirely bare, and revealed sufficient of the bust to show the sculptural contours of the round, fair, and well-detached bosoms. The naked arms had a graceful curve which admirably became their perfect modelling; and though the skirt of the shining robe was so ample, yet did its plaits and folds afford an external indication of the symmetry which it concealed. Thus the shape of the lower limbs might be conjectured, ay, followed and delineated by the mind's eye, especially when the imagination was assisted by the exquisite conformation of the foot and ankle that peeped from beneath the satin dress.

Pearls set off the purple glossiness of her luxuriant hair, and pearls also marked with their delicate tracery the roundness of her swanlike neck. Nothing could exceed the glowing appearance of the Countess of Curzon in that dark Oriental loveliness which made her seem like a houri fresh from the sensualities and luxuriousness of Mahomet's paradise. All the brilliance of beauty, the grace of motion, and the seductiveness of look which ever combined to render woman alike charming and dangerous now mingled all the magic of their spells wherewith to invest the Countess of Curzon.

In the brilliant toilet which Editha had just achieved, she was efficiently assisted by the faithful Gertrude, her principal lady's-maid. This young woman, who was herself exceedingly beautiful, was devotedly attached to her mistress, — not merely because she was a confidante in Lady Curzon's intrigues, nor because she was well remunerated for her complicity, but because she really loved the countess for her own sake, with a rare amount of disinterested affection.

" Your ladyship never appeared more beautiful than you are to-night," said Gertrude, as she threw a rich ermine cloak over the shoulders of her mistress.

" I am glad you tell me so, my dear girl," replied Editha, laughing gaily, " for I know that you are impartial. And now remember what I have told you."

" Your ladyship knows," said Gertrude, with a meaning look, " that I always attend to your ladyship's commands."

" You do, my dear girl," observed the countess, tapping

her caressingly on the cheek, " and you are aware that there is nothing I will not do to serve you in return. Whenever you find a husband that will suit you," added Editha, with a gay smile, " I shall take care of your dowry."

" Oh, there is time enough to think of that," exclaimed Gertrude. " I do not wish to quit your ladyship's service, even to be married."

" But you must not lend a willing ear to the idle flatteries of men," said Editha. " Wait till you are married, Gertrude, and then you can do anything, gratifying every fantasy and yielding to every whim. But, in the meantime, prudence should lead you to be what the world calls virtuous. At all events," she added, with a gay laugh and with a look singularly full of wickedness and arch significance, " do not yield to the honeyed words of my husband."

" Oh, was not that farce an amusing one? " cried Gertrude, bursting into a peal of the merriest laughter, while her own looks also expressed a roguish meaning. " It was better than any play at a theatre. Such equivoques! But when will his lordship return home? "

" I do not know exactly," responded Editha. " In a few days, I presume. He told me that he was going to France on some sudden and pressing business. Whether it be true or not, I cannot say. But 'tis now nine o'clock, and I must be off to Lady Lechmere's."

The countess thereupon issued forth from her boudoir, and descended the stairs with the splendid ermine cloak flowing loosely around her. When at the bottom of the staircase she looked up; and perceiving that Gertrude was leaning over the balusters of the landing above, Editha gave the abigail a parting look of deep meaning, which was responded to by one of equally vivid intelligence. Lady Curzon then entered the carriage, and was driven to Lady Lechmere's abode in North Audley Street.

The brilliant saloons of this mansion were already crowded when Editha made her appearance; but amongst all the blaze of beauty and fashion there assembled no female scion of the aristocracy was more remarkable for the loveliness of her person and the elegance of her attire than Lady Curzon. Immediately on entering, she was surrounded by a host of admirers; and assuredly that was a moment of proud triumph for the charming patrician lady, to per-

ceive that many rivals were deserted by their fickle gallants, who now hastened to pay their homage to herself.

Lady Lechmere was a widow on the shady side of forty; and notwithstanding the disparity of their years, Lady Curzon being only six and twenty, the closest friendship existed between them.

Amongst the brilliant company thus assembled at Lady Lechmere's perhaps the only one of the male sex who could not boast of being descended either from some Norman cutthroat baron or from some vile harlot of the reign of Charles II, and who could not produce a genealogical tree containing a thousand names, or a coat of arms interwoven with the mosaic work of endless quarterings, the only man, in fact, who had no prestige of high birth, lofty rank, and proud title to recommend him to the notice of the fashionable world, was Mr. Emmerson, the bill-broker of Nicholas Lane, Lombard Street. It was true that if he possessed an office in the dingy regions of the City, he likewise owned a splendid house at Clapham; and that if he had no aristocratic title to embellish his name, at all events he had the reputation of enjoying an immense fortune. Nevertheless, these circumstances would not have sufficed as an introduction into the exclusive circles of the West End had not some other influence been exercised in order to throw open the gilded portals of fashion to admit him within the sphere of that roseate scene of luxury.

What, then, had proved the talisman to open these doors to the bill-broker of Nicholas Lane? What was the mysterious sesame which had produced this magic effect? It was to the Countess of Curzon that Emmerson was indebted for the extraordinary privilege which he thus enjoyed. In plain terms, Editha had become his mistress.

Possessed of the forged bills, Emmerson had experienced but little trouble in coercing her; and when once she had abandoned herself to him in order to regain possession of those documents, she found that he was prepared to behave toward her with the utmost munificence. Steeped in debt, extravagant to a degree, having a thousand wants and no means of gratifying them, inasmuch as her tradesmen refused further credit, and she could obtain but little money from her husband, Lady Curzon eagerly availed herself of the proposals made by her City friend; and in return for

the gold with which he profusely supplied her she rewarded him as liberally with her favours. But to avert suspicion and avoid the chance of scandal, Editha had not herself been the direct means of introducing the bill-broker into fashionable circles. Lady Lechmere, who was privy to her friend's intrigue, had cheerfully undertaken this task. Accordingly, Emmerson had first appeared as the guest of Lady Lechmere; and therefore the supposition was that in this capacity had he been introduced to Lady Curzon, and thus formed her acquaintance.

The reader has already seen that Emmerson was a veritable money-grubber, stern and implacable in his financial dealings, intensely selfish, unprincipled, and hollow-hearted. But he had become completely infatuated with Lady Curzon. Not only did her extraordinary beauty and her glowing temperament exercise a magic influence over a man of strong sensuality and licentious ardour, but his vanity was also supremely flattered in possessing so aristocratic a mistress. When he beheld that woman of dazzling beauty, elegant manners, and brilliant accomplishments enter the ballroom in all the glory, pride, and effulgence of her rank and her loveliness, he felt that it was worth any sacrifice to be enabled to say to himself, "That woman, the cynosure of all admiration, the centre of all regards, the object of all devotion, that woman is mine!" Then, on accosting her and being received with a smile, all the sweetness of which was not allowed to appear in the presence of observers, but was shed upon him, as it were, in the furtiveness of a rapid sidelong look, to feel that while men of the proudest titles and loftiest rank were gazing with admiration, passion, and desire upon that lady of warm and glowing beauty, to feel, we say, that he, the mere citizen, without birth or aristocratic halo, was the master of all those charms, this was indeed flattering to the pride of a vain, conceited, self-sufficient, and to some extent weak-minded person such as Emmerson.

But he had the good sense not to accost her the moment she entered the room, not to obtrude himself upon her, nor pointedly thrust himself amidst the aristocratic circle of gallants by whom she was immediately surrounded. Much less did he attempt to elbow away any one who for a moment might appear to be enacting the part of rivalry. With con-

summate duplicity Editha had made him believe that she really loved him, and that it was not his gold which purchased her favours, but that he himself was the object of her disinterested affection. Strong, therefore, in the conceit with which she had thus imbued him, and to which his infatuation rendered him so easily accessible, he exhibited no jealousy when he saw her smiling upon others who were really handsome and possessed of qualifications calculated to win a woman's heart. Quietly biding his time, as it were, he waited until the first dazzling effects of her presence had passed away, and when the evening was somewhat more advanced and her admirers began to flit about elsewhere, then was it that Mr. Emmerson availed himself of the opportunity to approach Editha, and take a seat by her side.

For a short time they conversed together upon indifferent topics; but presently Lady Curzon rose, saying with a smile, "Give me your arm, and let us visit the card-room for a few minutes."

Thither they accordingly proceeded. It was not, however, to gaze upon the card-players, nor to observe what was going on in this room, that Lady Curzon had desired to be conducted thither; but it was because there were comparatively few persons in this apartment, and therefore it was more easy to converse without restraint. Accordingly, seating themselves on a sofa at a distance from the card-players, the aristocratic lady and her citizen paramour began to discourse in a confidential manner.

"You are truly beautiful to-night, Editha," said Emmerson, gazing with unfeigned rapture upon the charming creature who affected to love him.

"And you also appear to great advantage," she replied, although in reality his sallow complexion, hard features, and looks denoting the driver of close bargains filled her with a disgust which only a consummate duplicity enabled her to conceal.

"And is it possible," he said, drinking intoxication from her glances, "is it possible that you, the courted, the caressed, and the brilliant idol of fashion, really love me, the unpretending, unassuming man of business?"

"You know that I love you," she answered, fixing upon him a look that seemed full of passion, while her magnificent eyes vibrated like stars. "Have I not shown you that I

love you? Do I not incur constant risks in order that I may lavish upon you the proofs of my affection?"

"Yes, yes," murmured Emmerson, his head losing itself in the ebriety of his feelings. "But will you always love me thus?"

"Do you doubt it?" she asked, her looks assuming an expression of mournful reproach.

"But did you not love your husband when you first married him? Then did you not love Colonel Malpas?" asked Emmerson, softly.

"Oh, mention not the name of that vile wretch!" exclaimed Editha, the glow of indignation suffusing her splendid countenance and dyeing even her neck and bosom with its mantling vividness. "But yes, we will speak of him for one moment," she observed, checking her wrathful feelings as a sentiment of curiosity suddenly inspired her, "and that is in order that I may ask what has become of him?"

"He is still an inmate of the King's Bench," answered Emmerson. "He has made two or three endeavours to release himself by what is called bail, but the securities proposed have never been accepted by the judge, and therefore he still lingers in prison."

"Where I hope you intend to keep him as long as you can," said Lady Curzon, with the evident bitterness of a deeply cherished vengeance.

"Depend upon it, Editha, I will keep him there as long as I am able," returned Emmerson. "Indeed, were he my own brother or father, if he had given offence to you, he should be punished with all possible severity."

"You seem never wearied of giving me proofs of your affection," said Lady Curzon. "And yet I am always taking advantage of your kindness, your goodness toward me. Indeed, this very night have I a favour to ask."

"Name it, name it, dear Editha," said the infatuated Emmerson. "Tell me what I can do to prove my devotion."

"Most humiliating and distressing for me is it to speak of money matters," said Lady Curzon, affecting to be overwhelmed with confusion, "but you know how I am situated —"

"Say not another word," interrupted the bill-broker. "But may I not have the pleasure, the ineffable pleasure, of writing you a check this very night for what you may

require, so that your faithful Gertrude may procure you the amount at my banker's the first thing in the morning? Will you not, I ask, afford me that opportunity? " he urged, with a look of deep meaning and in a tone of impassioned entreaty.

" Ah! can you not imagine that I have already made the necessary arrangements? " said Editha, with downcast eyes and blushing cheeks, while she played archly and coquettishly with her fan.

" Yes, I dared to anticipate this happiness, this renewed experience of paradise," returned Emmerson, " and therefore I am not expected home at Clapham to-night."

" Gertrude will come hither at midnight," said Editha, with a look of intelligence. " Half an hour afterward you must be at the corner of the street with a hackney-coach."

Emmerson threw upon his charming mistress a look of intoxicated delight, and they then quitted the card-room, returning to the more spacious saloons where the dancing was in progress. Here they separated for the present, Emmerson joining a group of gentlemen with whom he was well acquainted, inasmuch as their promissory notes were all in his strong box in Nicholas Lane, while, on the other hand, the Countess of Curzon accepted an invitation from some nobleman to join the dance.

A little after midnight Editha watched an opportunity to steal away, unperceived, from the brilliant throng in the splendid saloons; and ascending a staircase, she threaded a long carpeted passage with the air of one to whom the place was quite familiar. Opening a door at the end of this passage, she entered a bedchamber where a cheerful fire was blazing in the grate and wax tapers were already lighted upon the table. Her own ermine cloak was likewise there, lying upon the bed.

Carefully locking the door by which she had entered, Editha opened another one exactly facing it. This second door communicated with a back staircase, feebly lighted by a suspended lamp. For a few minutes the countess remained standing at the head of this staircase, as if in expectation of some arrival. Such was the case. A small bell was heard to tinkle, and at the signal — for a signal it assuredly was — Editha hastily descended the staircase and unlocked a door

at the bottom. This door opened into a by-street, and a female figure, muffled in an ample cloak and wearing a thick black veil, at once crossed the threshold.

The door was closed and locked again, and Editha, followed by the muffled figure, hastened up into the bedchamber. The newcomer now threw off her bonnet, veil, and cloak, and revealed the bewitching person of Miss Gertrude, the lady's-maid.

A somewhat singular scene now took place; for, on the one hand, Lady Curzon began to put off her magnificent apparel, while, on the other hand, Gertrude likewise proceeded to undress herself. Had any concealed observer been nigh, and in a position to peep at all that was going on, he could not fail to have noticed that the lady and the lady's-maid were exactly of the same height, but that the figure and bust of Gertrude were the least thing fuller and more swelling than the lighter symmetry of her mistress. Nevertheless, the garments of the one would fit the other, as was indeed very soon shown on the present occasion; for while Editha assumed the modest apparel of her dependent, the latter proceeded to deck herself in the brilliant vesture of the countess. Even to the very pearls and other ornaments did Gertrude take, as it were, the place of her mistress; and during the exchange of garments a great deal of roguish laughter and a great many sly looks passed between the lady and the lady's-maid.

At length, when these mysterious toilets were completed, Editha assisted Gertrude to envelop herself in the splendid ermine cloak, the hood of which the girl drew so completely over her countenance as most effectually to shade it. She then issued from the chamber, not by the private door and back staircase by which she had entered, but by the other door opening upon the long carpeted passage.

Thus apparelled in the shining amber-coloured robe and enveloped in the splendid ermine cloak, with a stray curl or two of her own beautiful jetty hair peeping forth from beneath the hood, Gertrude might well indeed have been taken for the Countess of Curzon. To enact this part was all the more easy, inasmuch as at that particular period the cloak-hoods were entirely the fashion for ladies, on issuing forth from balls, parties, theatres, etc., and, like the Spanish mantillas or the Turkish veils, they were used so completely

to conceal the countenance as to afford no mean auxiliary to the intrigues of gallantry.

Lady Lechmere, who was deep in all the secrets of her friend Editha, was waiting on the first landing for the appearance of the disguised Gertrude; and making a signal to a servant who stood in the hall below, the cry of "Lady Curzon's carriage!" was immediately sent forth into the street.

"Now, my dear countess," said Lady Lechmere, as she accompanied the disguised Gertrude down the stairs, and thence through the hall as far as the very threshold of the mansion, "you do well to wrap yourself up in this manner. The night is bitterly cold, and coming out of hot rooms, it is enough to give you your death, susceptible of the chill as you are. Good night, my dear countess," she exclaimed, more loudly still.

And Gertrude, enacting the part of the said countess, shook Lady Lechmere by the hand with every appearance of the most friendly cordiality; then tripping lightly into the carriage, she was whirled away to Grosvenor Street.

In the meantime the real Countess of Curzon, completely disguised in Gertrude's apparel, wearing the ample cloak and the thick veil of that complaisant lady's-maid, descended the private staircase, and emerged by the side door into the by-street, at the corner of which Mr. Emmerson was waiting with a hackney-coach. Into the vehicle they got, and were driven as far as Oxford Street, where they alighted; and thence they proceeded on foot to Mrs. Gale's fashionable house of infamy in Soho Square.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LADY'S - MAID

THE carriage in which Gertrude was seated arrived in a few minutes at Curzon House, Grosvenor Street. The watchful hall porter, on the alert for his noble mistress's return, immediately opened the front door; and Gertrude, with the cloak-hood drawn over her countenance, issued from the carriage, ascended the stone steps in front of the mansion, and was passing rapidly through the hall toward the staircase, when the hall porter said, "Please, your ladyship, my lord has come back."

If death were really a phantom that appeared to those whom it was about to bear away from the realms of earth, then not even the presence of the grim destroyer suddenly starting up before the young lady's-maid would have caused her so mortal a terror as this announcement which the porter made. It struck upon her brain like the blow of a hammer, pierced her heart with the pang of a fiery arrow, and then the next moment sent an ice-chill quivering through her entire frame. Her feet suddenly appeared to become heavy as lead, and refused to perform their office. As one who in a nightmare seeks to fly from some hideous object, but fancies that he has not the power to drag his limbs along, so was it with Gertrude. But still, while thus transfixed to the spot, and leaning against the hall table to prevent herself from falling, she tenaciously kept the ermine hood closed over her countenance.

The hall porter, being overcome with drowsiness, had hurried away into the side room where he slept; and thus he did not observe that his announcement of the earl's return had produced any extraordinary effect upon her whom he of course believed to be the countess herself.

But the earl, who had heard the carriage stop and the front door open, now issued forth from the dining-room where he had been sitting; and the sudden appearance of the nobleman startled Gertrude into new life, and not only relieved her feet from the leaden sensation that had paralyzed their power, but gave to them the fleetest wings.

"Well, Editha," said the earl, as he issued from the dining-room, "not a word of welcome, not a syllable of any kind? Not even a look of recognition?"

But his lordship suddenly stopped short in mingled astonishment and dismay, for Gertrude flew rather than walked toward the stairs, up which she bounded with such a marvellous agility that she was out of sight in a moment.

"Perdition!" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, a whole hurricane of suspicions sweeping through his brain; and away in pursuit of the fugitive did he rush.

As he was half-way up the stairs he heard a door closed violently and locked as suddenly up above. Conjecturing that it was the door of his wife's boudoir, he hastened thither, and, as he expected, found it fast.

"Editha, open this door — I insist upon it!" he said, with his lips at the keyhole, so as to speak only in a whisper that might not be overheard by any of the other members of the household.

No answer was returned, and the earl spoke not only louder, but in a more menacing tone. Still there was no response. The earl's suspicions became a thousand times more poignant, though not more definite; at all events, he could conjecture nothing but that there must have been a lover concealed in his wife's boudoir, and that in a sudden panic-terror she had rushed up to screen him. He accordingly threatened to force the door unless it were immediately unlocked.

Gertrude, half-wild with alarm, saw that another moment's delay would produce a fearful scandal throughout the house, and she therefore unlocked the door. She had thrown off the ermine cloak, but still remained in the ball costume. Pale as death, her half-exposed bosom heaving convulsively, and her hands joined in entreaty, she fell upon her knees as the earl entered the boudoir.

"Heavens! what is the meaning of this?" he exclaimed, as he at once recognized the beautiful lady's-maid.

But Gertrude could give no response; the truth she dared not tell, and no falsehood came ready-made to her lips in that moment of indescribable terror. Speechless therefore did she remain, but gazing up at her astounded and bewildered master with so frightened and deprecating a regard that it showed she expected little mercy at his hands.

The Earl of Curzon closed the door of the boudoir, and leaning back against it, gazed down in speechless astonishment upon the kneeling girl. There she was, clad in the splendid raiment of her mistress, and with Editha's pearls, too, on her hair and around her neck. Yes, and she had returned home muffled up in Editha's own ermine cloak. But it was impossible that she could have personated the countess at Lady Lechmere's grand entertainment; she must have assumed that dress after her mistress had figured in it at the ball, and she must have come home thus disguised in the carriage in order to afford Editha an opportunity of remaining out elsewhere.

Such were the earl's reflections. Yes, he saw it all; the manœuvre was palpable enough. And now, too, did a cloud of recollections gush in unto his mind, and a light simultaneously broke upon them, clearing up all that was mysterious therein before. The incidents of that night when for the first time he suspected his wife's fidelity all sprang up as vividly to his mind's eye as if they were just being enacted over again.

And what were the incidents of that memorable night? Be it remembered that on the occasion to which we must thus retrospect, the Earl of Curzon had entered a hackney-coach and planted himself immediately opposite his own mansion, in order to watch Editha's movements, and that he saw a female figure, cloaked and veiled, enter the private carriage and drive away. In the hackney-coach he had followed the carriage to Lady Lechmere's, and had seen the veiled figure enter her ladyship's mansion. Then he was satisfied that it was his wife whom he had been watching. It must next be remembered that on returning home on foot, he had encountered another veiled and cloaked figure, whom he had fancied to be Gertrude; and when he endeavoured to engage her in conversation and make love to her, she at first mutely rejected his overtures and then screamed out.

These were the incidents over which the earl retrospected,

and he was now convinced that on that occasion there had been an exchange of apparel, and that it was really Gertrude whom he had seen proceed in the carriage to Lady Lechmere's, and his own countess whom he had importuned with his overtures in the street.

That such had indeed been the case he was now the more convinced on calling to mind certain other little incidents that had occurred on the same evening. And what were they? First, he had thought to meet his wife in the hall when the carriage came back, but she whom he then took to be his wife had flitted past him, rushed up-stairs, and disappeared from his view. Almost immediately after, be it recollected, he had seen her whom he took for Gertrude hastening up the stairs, and overtaking her he had again addressed some words to her, but she had broken away and bounded up the stairs. This second equivoque, as it then happened, and as he now read it, appeared entirely confirmatory of the fact that the lady and the lady's-maid had changed apparel on the memorable evening alluded to, and that he had in reality taken Gertrude for his wife and his wife for Gertrude.

All these recollections and the construction which he now put upon the incidents themselves were the subject of not more than a few moments' reflection, though we have taken several minutes to recapitulate its circumstances and make the explanation apparent to the reader. To the earl it was speedily clear as daylight; he saw it all, understood it all, for the complete clue to those incidents of the past was now afforded by the startling exposure of the intrigues of the present.

Gertrude, who was kneeling at his feet, had no difficulty in understanding from the varied though rapid expression which swept over his countenance what was passing in his mind; and now the keen sense of all the tremendous dangers which threatened her mistress inspired the girl, who neither lacked heroism nor artfulness, with a resolution to save her if possible.

"Oh, my lord," she exclaimed, rising from her knees, but still maintaining her hands clasped, "forgive me, pardon me, if I have dared to assume a dress belonging to her ladyship. I know that it was very wrong, most arrogant and presumptuous on my part —"

"Ah! Miss Gertrude," interrupted the earl, with a bitter irony in his accents, "the artifice is ingenious, but it will not succeed. 'Tis true that you might have borrowed the countess's dress, but how came the countess's carriage to bring you home from Lady Lechmere's?"

Thus speaking, with a voice and look showing that he was not to be deceived, he pushed hastily by the discomfited girl, and seized upon Editha's writing-desk which stood upon a table. On the former occasion when he had searched that desk, be it remembered, one of his own keys fitted it, and he now therefore had no difficulty in opening the desk again.

"Her ladyship is lost!" thought Gertrude within herself, as in cruel alarm she contemplated the earl's proceeding; for the abigail was pretty well assured that the desk would furnish proofs of her ladyship's amours. Resolved to save the countess, however, at any risk, and indeed at any sacrifice if it were possible, Gertrude advanced up to the table, and seizing her noble master's hand, she said, in a low, deep tone, "I conjure your lordship not to consummate this outrage against your innocent wife, nor give way to any suspicions which my folly and indiscretion may have excited."

The earl was too much tortured by the pangs of jealousy to experience any flaming up of a sensual passion through the contact of that soft warm hand which was thus purposely placed in contact with his own; but looking up, he met the earnest and imploring gaze which the pretty abigail's dark eyes fixed upon him. Then suddenly recollecting that on the former occasion of his suspicions being awakened against his wife, he had resolved to win over Gertrude to his interest if possible, and therefore seizing the present opportunity, he suddenly took both her hands in his own, and assuming a tender look, said, "My dear girl, you are deep in the confidence of your mistress; tell me everything, and I swear that I will always be your friend. I will never desert you, I will place you in a comfortable position, and will bestow upon you as much of my love as it is in my nature to experience or be able to give."

Thus speaking, he drew Gertrude toward him and passed his arm around her waist. The young woman not only suffered herself to be thus treated with a tenderness that

might not probably stop there, but actually encouraged him to take further advantage of the opportunity, the circumstances, and the hour; for she pressed closer to him, gazing up into his countenance with looks that at first only simulated an amorous feeling, but speedily began to swim with the wanton languor of really nascent desires. Indeed, when first she placed her hand in contact with that of the earl, it was as a provocative to his passions, — the execution of a sudden resolve to throw herself in as a means of diverting his attention from the pursuit on which it was fixed, and thus by her own sacrifice endeavour to save the countess. At the same time it must be confessed that Gertrude's sense of virtue was not very strong, inasmuch as she could so readily make up her mind to immolate her own honour in the hope of screening that of her mistress.

" Well, what reply do you mean to give me? " asked the nobleman, now pressing his lips to hers. " Will you transfer your devotion from the countess to me? Will you, in fact, give me your love and become worthy of mine? Tell me, Gertrude, what am I to expect from you? What will you do? "

" My lord, my lord," she murmured, now seeking, as it were, to nestle in his bosom, " I have nothing to reveal that could in any way compromise her ladyship. But come, let us leave this boudoir, and if you wish I will accompany you to your own room."

" Ah! Gertrude," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, who at any other time would have been worked up to a frenzy of desire by the contact of those voluptuous charms and by the provocative looks of the young girl who seemed ready to abandon her virgin innocence to his embrace; but other and fiercer fires were now consuming him, and the temptations of the siren wanton were ineffectual upon a heart scorching with the hell of its unappeasable jealousies. " Ah! Gertrude," he exclaimed, extricating himself from the half-embrace in which she had enfolded him, " you are in league with your mistress, — too much so, I fear, to enable you to devote yourself to me."

" Oh, my lord," she exclaimed, as the tears of mingled vexation and wounded pride rolled down her cheeks, " I thought that you did care for me a little, but now I perceive that you only sought to trifle with me."

"Ah! I am afraid that 'tis I who have been trifled with," exclaimed the earl, bitterly; and at the same time he began dragging forth the contents of Editha's writing-desk.

Gertrude saw that further remonstrance and artifice were unavailing; and smarting under a deep sense of humiliation at the rejection of the overtures which she had so pointedly made, she stood by in sullen silence. Not only was she vexed at the failure of her artifice, but her natural woman's pride was hurt and wounded.

"Here!" suddenly exclaimed the earl, after turning over a number of letters of no particular consequence, but at length lighting upon that very selfsame one which had aroused his suspicions on the former occasion. "Here!" he cried, tossing it to Gertrude, "take and read this, and then persist in telling me, if you dare, that you are not in the confidence of your mistress."

The girl took the note which was thus angrily and contemptuously flung at her, and read its contents as follows:

"I have received your hasty note, my dear Editha, and send you a reply by Gertrude. Yes, I will be at home all the evening, and will adopt the usual precautions. You have nothing to fear on that account. The servant shall receive orders to admit no one but the Countess of Curzon. But are you certain that you can trust the girl?

"Your affectionate friend,

"Katherine Lechmere."

Eagerly and intently did the Earl of Curzon watch the countenance of Gertrude as she perused that billet, and the girl felt the telltale blush stealing over her countenance — a blush which, were it to seal her doom, she had not the power to restrain. Besides, she was hurt at the moment at the doubt implied in the note relative to her own trustworthiness; but a second thought showed her that the countess was not blamable for what Lady Lechmere wrote.

"Now, youny woman, will you confess?" said the earl, as he took back the note from her hand, "or will you dare my vengeance by your obstinacy?"

"I know nothing about it, my lord, I know nothing about it! You may kill me," she added, with hysterical

vehemence, "but I shall confess nothing, because there is nothing to confess."

"We shall see," muttered the earl, with concentrated passion; and he continued his examination of the contents of the writing-desk.

One after another he glanced at the papers and tossed them aside; but presently he drew forth an envelope addressed to the countess in a bold mercantile hand and with the word "Private" in the corner.

Hastily opening this packet, the earl discovered that it contained several bills of exchange, the acceptances of which at first struck him to be his own; but perceiving that they were drawn by Percy Malpas, he instantaneously knew that he had never put his name to such securities at all in favour of the colonel. A closer examination showed him that the acceptance, written in his own name, was a forgery, and on looking at the back he perceived the endorsement of Emmerson. Ten thousand demons now appeared to be tearing at the earl's heart, while vulture-talons were fastening upon his brain, as some portion of the truth became revealed to his comprehension. For he saw, he understood, he comprehended but too well that it was his wife who had forged his name to those bills, and the forgery had been perpetrated in favour of Colonel Malpas. Then what else could he surmise but that the colonel had been Editha's paramour?

Poor Gertrude now indeed felt more than ever convinced that her beloved mistress was lost without redemption. She knew of those bills, knew that Emmerson had sent them back, recollected that the packet had been delivered one day to the countess when seated in the boudoir with two or three lady friends, and remembered also that Editha had hurriedly consigned that packet to her desk at the moment, with the intention of destroying its contents when alone. But the oversight on Editha's part in neglecting to do so now threatened to prove fatal indeed; and the poor girl, as all these thoughts swept through her brain, trembled to the deepest confines of her whole being.

The Earl of Curzon had become ghastly pale, so that his naturally handsome countenance was now almost hideous to gaze upon, while the sinister light that shone in his eyes bespoke terrible plans of vengeance already revolving in his mind. Flinging a fearfully sardonic look upon Gertrude,

but without breathing a word, he secured Lady Lechmere's note and the packet of forged bills about his person; and finding no other document of any consequence in the writing-desk, he tossed back the various letters and papers which he had disturbed, but without giving himself the trouble to relock the desk. There was now no necessity to attempt any concealment as to the search which he had instituted.

But he did not immediately leave the room; he appeared to hesitate what course to pursue. He looked at Gertrude, not with the gaze of desire; no heart had he at this moment for tender thoughts or sensual pursuits. His outraged honour and his wife's crimes were the all-engrossing subject of his thoughts, the all-powerful influence that enchained his heart's keenest emotions. But he fixed his eyes upon Gertrude for a few moments, to ascertain whether there were any signs of contrition about her, — whether, in a word, there was any chance of her turning against her mistress. But though her countenance was also pale as his own, it nevertheless expressed nought save a moody sullenness, mingled with an expression of hatred, — as if, on the one hand, she knew the case was desperate so far as her mistress was concerned, but that, on the other, she longed to wreak her vengeance upon the earl himself for having discovered his wife's perfidy.

The nobleman was too proud to reiterate his proposals to a girl who gave him no encouragement to do so; and he was about to quit the boudoir when he suddenly recollected that Gertrude might steal out of the house and warn Editha of what was in store for her, thereby preparing her to meet a storm which the earl was desirous should burst with overwhelming suddenness upon her head. Accordingly, throwing another significant glance upon the abigail, he said, with a cold irony, " Since you are so fond of personating your mistress with regard to her dress, Gertrude, you may now occupy her place in this boudoir till the morning, for I suppose that she purposes to remain abroad all night."

Having thus spoken, the Earl of Curzon stalked out of the room, locking the door and taking the key with him.

CHAPTER IX

INTREPIDITY

When thus left alone, Gertrude stood gazing in dull vacancy for some moments upon the writing-desk which had furnished the proofs of Editha's criminality. Slowly awakening from this stupor of mingled dread and dismay, the abigail began to lay aside the splendid apparel in which she was decorated. Depositing the pearls and the ornaments upon the toilet-table, she put off the amber-coloured robe, and then negligently and irresolutely began to comb out her long dark hair.

But it was evident that she was revolving some idea in her mind, and that whether she should retire to rest or carry out this idea constituted the indecision in which she was hovering. Laying down the comb, she seated herself upon a sofa, and supporting her well-shaped head upon her really beautiful hand, she began seriously to deliberate upon the risks and chances of the project which every moment was becoming more firmly settled in her mind. Her naturally mischievous eyes were now full of a serious expression, while her cherry lips became compressed with the firmness which is characteristic of a heroine. It was evident that she was revolving some desperate or dangerous scheme; and indeed, if she were just now overready to yield up her honour in the hope of diverting the earl's attention from the proceedings of the countess, she was now as devotedly resolving to risk her life in order to serve that mistress whom she loved so well.

Suddenly starting from her recumbent posture and from her deep reverie, she glanced toward the timepiece which stood upon the mantel; but that clock had stopped, and she knew not what hour it was. But calculating that it

was about one o'clock when she had returned from Lady Lechmere's, that the scene with the earl had occupied half an hour, and that a similar interval had elapsed since his departure from the room, she argued that it must now be two o'clock in the morning. Her calculation as to the time was by no means a trivial thing, even in the midst of the important considerations that were crowding through her mind. The fact was that the watchman of the district invariably passed along Grosvenor Street about ten minutes past every hour throughout the night, and the project which the venturous damsel had in view could not very well be carried out with success if the aforesaid nocturnal guardian happened to be in the neighbourhood at the time.

Supposing it, therefore, to be about two o'clock, she reckoned that if she let twenty minutes pass she would be ensuring the safety of her scheme; and winding up the timepiece, she set it going. She now opened the drawers, took forth all the splendid cashmere shawls and the strongest satin scarfs belonging to her mistress, and these she rolled up lengthwise into the form of a rope, fastening them together. Remorselessly and unhesitatingly did she thus treat those handsome articles of apparel which in the aggregate cost hundreds of guineas, twisting and knotting them just as ruthlessly as if they were old rags; but then, she had in view a certain project, the success of which was a matter outweighing the price of all the finery in the world.

In this manner full twenty minutes were passed, and then the damsel prepared to carry her bold design into execution. First she pushed a heavy chest of drawers up against the window, and completely around this ponderous piece of furniture did she pass the rope which she had made, not fastening it, but allowing it to run loosely, as if over the wheel of a pulley. Then, against the chest of drawers she placed the sofa, a great armchair, and other things to keep it firm and steady; and all this being done, she returned again to the ransacking of her mistress's wardrobe. But this time it was for some fitting garment to put on. Enveloping herself in the darkest coloured cloak she could find, and selecting the simplest straw bonnet that presented itself, she now entered upon the crowning act of this night's strange drama.

Gently opening the lower part of the window, she listened

for a few moments, and no sound of human voice or footfall reached her ears. Then she peeped forth, and by the mingled moonlight and lamplight she was enabled to assure herself that the street was entirely deserted. All was still; not a light was even visible at any opposite window. Now, then, was the moment, now the opportunity. Nor did the heroic Gertrude shrink from the danger of her self-imposed task, appalling though that peril must have seemed to be, notwithstanding the marvellous intrepidity of her soul.

Having extinguished the light in the boudoir, she flung forth the rope in such a manner that it was doubled, both ends descending toward the pavement below. She then passed out of the window, and firmly clutching the double rope in both hands, while her feet clung to it also, she began to lower herself with amazing presence of mind. But scarcely had she thus commenced her fearful descent when the straw bonnet flew from her head and the cloak became detached from her person, thus leaving her in a state of semi-nudity and her hair all flowing wildly. The slanting moonbeams of silver played upon the countenance that expressed all the decision of a heroine, upon the bare bosom which remained upheaved with a strong feeling of suspense, and on the naked arms, so white and well-rounded, which clung with such tenacity to the double rope. Fortunate perhaps was it for the damsel that she got rid of the encumbrance of the ample cloak, the folds of which might only have embarrassed the nimble play of her delicate feet and robust legs as she slid gently down. Her lithe form, possessing all the suppleness of a bayadere and the elasticity of a serpent, seemed to adapt itself yieldingly to the swaying of the rope and to every movement that she herself made in her perilous descent; nor less was it apparent that if with a perfect symmetry she blended great muscular power, to her love for her mistress she also united an extraordinary moral courage.

But 'tis done! her delicate feet touch the pavement, and she stands safely in the street. A minute has scarcely elapsed since she crept forth from the window above. The moment she thus stands upon firm ground, she picks up the cloak and the bonnet, and her semi-nude form is again enveloped in the capacious mantle, while her disordered hair is gathered up hastily beneath the straw hat. Then she

takes the end of one length of the rope only, and by pulling it toward her, draws it down from the chest of drawers in the boudoir, just as a rope passes over a drum-wheel when one end is detached. She now coils up this rope of shawls with the utmost despatch, conceals it under her mantle, and hurries away. Thus the only outward and visible trace that is left of her exploit is the open window of the boudoir; but being an upper one, the watchman, even if he saw it when passing by, would not think it necessary to raise an alarm on that account.

Away sped Gertrude to Soho Square; and on reaching Mrs. Gale's establishment, she was immediately admitted, some of the servants of that establishment remaining up all night. On asking for Mrs. Gale, she was told that this "lady" had retired to rest; but Gertrude, by stating that her business was of the utmost importance, induced one of the servants to arouse the mistress of the place. Finally, after some little trouble, Gertrude was enabled to obtain an interview with Mrs. Gale; and the moment they were alone together, the damsel requested that she might see the Countess of Curzon immediately. Mrs. Gale asked if anything unpleasant had occurred, to which Gertrude replied in the affirmative, without, however, entering into particulars. Mrs. Gale, notwithstanding, heard enough to induce her to repair to the chamber where the countess and Emmerson were together; and, to be brief, in a few minutes Editha was conducted to the apartment where Gertrude had waited.

Mrs. Gale withdrew; and the Countess of Curzon, who had only huddled on a few clothes, exclaimed, with a tone and look of poignant alarm, "Good heavens, Gertrude! what has happened?"

The abigail proceeded to narrate all that had taken place, — how the earl had returned, how he had discovered that she was disguised in her mistress's apparel, how he had opened the desk and possessed himself of Lady Lechmere's note as well as the forged bills, how he had locked her in the boudoir, and how she had escaped thence in the manner just described.

It would be impossible to convey an idea of the thrilling, feverish, and rapid transitions of emotion through which the countess passed as these hurried incidents struck one

after the other upon her ear. Alarm at the return of her husband, terror at the discoveries he had made, admiration of Gertrude's devoted conduct, the excitement of absolute horror at her perilous descent, and then fresh fears and apprehensions on her own account, — these were the startling and stirring feelings which in rapid succession were conjured up by Gertrude's narrative. But when the intrepid young woman displayed that coil of rope made of twisted shawls, and which she had brought thither, Editha's emotion of wonder and admiration triumphed for the instant over the more selfish sensations of alarm on her own account, and flinging her arms about the girl's neck, the countess embraced her with the liveliest gratitude and affection.

"I thought your ladyship should know of all that has happened as speedily as possible," said Gertrude. "In the first place, I feared lest his lordship should by any accident suspect that you were here and come to seek you. Secondly, I thought that if when you returned home in the morning, disguised in my apparel and unprepared to receive the earl, you suddenly encountered him, you would be so completely overwhelmed that no possible excuse or explanation would come to your aid. And thirdly, it struck me that if any tale can possibly be made up to save your ladyship's honour, it will be necessary to lose no time in putting Lady Lechmere on her guard, should the earl take it into his head to call and question her. For all these reasons I felt assured it would be better to warn you at once of what had occurred, and hence my resolve to escape from that boudoir and join you here, at any risk."

"Never, never, dear Gertrude," exclaimed the countess, "shall I forget this more than kindness, this positive devotion, on your part. No sister would have risked a hundredth part as much for me. But what is to be done? What on earth can be done? Idiot, idiot that I was to leave those bills in my desk! — yes, or to leave even so slight a clue as that note which he showed you, and the contents of which you have recapitulated to me! Ah! wretched woman that I am," she cried, wringing her hands bitterly. "Like all my five sisters, like my mother, like my aunts, like every female member, in fine, of my family, am I destined to be dishonoured and disgraced! Oh, Gertrude, Gertrude!

what a scandal, what an excitement will there be in the fashionable world to-morrow when the explosion takes place!"

"But lady, dear lady," interrupted the girl, "is all this risk that I have run to be in vain? Can you devise nothing, can you think of nothing to avert the impending ruin?"

"I do not see what can be done," answered the almost distracted Editha. "Even if I could get back unperceived into the house, the evidence is too strong against me. Those bills, those dreadful bills, and then Lady Lechmere's unfortunate note! Oh, Gertrude, I am undone, I am undone! Ruin is inevitable, destruction is certain!"

"Yes, if you meet your misfortunes half-way, or sink down under them at once," exclaimed Gertrude. "But, happen what will, your ladyship must not stay here another minute; for if the earl did come and find you in such a place, — pardon me the observation, — there would then be no hope nor chance of either explaining away existing circumstances or of eventual reconciliation."

"Then what would you advise?" asked the countess, with all the fluttering of painful excitement. "Whither shall I go? What asylum shall I seek?"

"Come home, my lady, and dare it all," rejoined Gertrude. "That is the best plan. Who knows what the chapter of accidents may turn up in your favour? But of course, if you once absent yourself from your home and the household knows it, then do you convict yourself beyond all redemption."

"But how, in the name of Heaven, are we to enter?" demanded the countess. "Surely not by the same way that you ere now quitted the mansion?" she said, with a hysterical laugh.

"Your ladyship forgets," said the abigail, "that if nothing had happened you would have returned home between five and six in the morning, as on former occasions."

"Yes, dressed in your apparel, my dear Gertrude," exclaimed the countess, suddenly recollecting these matters which had been lost sight of in the poignancy of her alarm. "And I have the key of the area door with me — Oh, all this had slipped my memory."

"Hasten, my lady, and let us depart," said Gertrude. "Come, time presses — "

"One minute, and I will return," exclaimed the countess; and she quitted the room where this colloquy took place.

What she said to Emmerson on returning to him, or what they arranged between themselves during the few minutes that they hurriedly conversed while the countess finished dressing herself, matters not now. Suffice it to say that the infatuated bill-broker wrote her ladyship a check upon his banker for a couple of thousand pounds, and that she soon afterward quitted Mrs. Gale's establishment in company with Gertrude.

Back to Grosvenor Street did the lady and the lady's-maid proceed together. The boudoir window was still open, and not a light was visible in any part of the house. That Gertrude's flight had remained undiscovered was therefore evident, and that the earl had retired to rest was presumable, if not certain.

Editha and her maid descended the area steps and entered the house by means of a duplicate key of the servants' door which her ladyship had in her possession. During the walk home from Soho Square they had determined what course to pursue. Most of the locks of the upper chambers were of pretty well the same pattern; and Gertrude had assured her mistress that several of the bedroom keys fitted each other's doors, and that it was more than probable one of them would suit that of the boudoir. If this should prove to be the case, it was decided that the countess should take possession of the boudoir, so that the earl might be completely astounded when he went thither with the idea of liberating Gertrude in the morning, — it being also hoped by the two artful women that this mystification would render him more pliant and accessible to any artifices that might be adopted to explain away the present suspicions. But, on the other hand, if no key could be found to open the boudoir, then it was resolved that the countess should pass the night in another chamber, and that all the rest should be left entirely to the chapter of accidents.

Such were the plans deliberated upon and settled during the hurried twenty minutes' walk from Soho Square to Grosvenor Street; and now that Editha and her faithful abigail were once more within the walls of Curzon House, the heart of each beat with acute suspense. They had to grope their way in the dark, not daring to run the risk of

being observed wandering about the house with a candle. Like spirits did they steal from the lower regions up into the hall, and as noiselessly and carefully did they thence ascend the principal staircase to the stories above. There they speedily possessed themselves of half a dozen keys, which the expert lady's-maid, whose presence of mind exceeded that of her mistress, tried in the lock of the boudoir door. Nor was she disappointed in the calculation she had made, inasmuch as one of them turned easily in the lock.

Editha and Gertrude entered, locking the door behind them, although the latter did not purpose to remain long in the boudoir. To shut down the window and put the furniture back into its place, were now the next steps adopted by Editha and her maid; and notwithstanding they were in the dark, they nevertheless made these adjustments as noiselessly as possible. Gertrude then assisted Editha to undress herself; and having done this, she prepared to leave her ladyship for the rest of the night, or, rather, for the next few hours of the morning.

"Pray sustain your spirits, my lady," said the faithful girl, "and there is no telling what may happen for the best. But mind when your ladyship locks the door after me that you take out the key, so that when his lordship comes in the morning there may be no impediment to his unlocking the door. Then what will be his surprise at finding your ladyship here instead of me!"

Editha was about to make some reply, when a noise, as of some one moving about the house, reached their ears. They remained dead silent, holding their very breath to listen. The sounds of footsteps stealthily creaking approached the door of that boudoir, and now Gertrude, with admirable presence of mind, drew forth the key from the lock.

"Why did you do that?" asked Editha, in the lowest possible whisper.

"Oh, my dear lady," responded Gertrude, in a tone of concentrated joy, though likewise speaking in a whisper, "because I suddenly behold a means of accomplishing your salvation. Hush, hush!"

And in a few moments, as the steps outside stopped at the door, the lady and the maid both heard a key cautiously introduced into the lock. Thereupon the Countess of Curzon

suddenly divined the truth, — that same truth which had already struck Gertrude, and the important results of which the astute girl had immediately foreseen. Yes, it was now apparent enough to Editha also. Her husband, the earl, was no doubt coming to share the couch of the lady's-maid.

A few more whispered words passed rapidly between Editha and Gertrude, but so low that they were only just audible to themselves, and could not have been heard by anybody even at a couple of yards' distance.

That the earl was approaching without a light was certain, because not a ray gleamed through the keyhole nor shone under the door. And now this door was slowly opened, and Gertrude, assuming the frightened tone of one suddenly starting from her sleep, exclaimed, " Who is there? "

" 'Tis I, dearest Gertrude," answered the earl, in a tone that was tremulous with desire, and he closed the door behind him.

" But, my lord, I thought that you had conceived a hatred for me ere now? " exclaimed the abigail, in a deprecatory tone.

" Ah! but I was enraged, dear girl, cruelly enraged," replied Curzon, now pausing to lock the door. " But on retiring to rest I could not sleep, and gradually your image rose up in my mind, until at last it has so far got the better of all other thoughts and impressions that I have resolved to enjoy a few hours of love and bliss in your arms, and leave until to-morrow the vexations, the scandals, and the exposures that may belong thereto. So let me embrace thee, dearest Gertrude, let me embrace thee! " cried the earl, his voice now swelling with the tremulous exultation of desire mingled with anticipated triumph.

And through the utter darkness of that boudoir did he feel his way toward the couch, into which Editha, his own wife Editha, had stealthily crept, while Gertrude had glided away, after answering him, into the farthest corner of the room.

" Wherefore will you not speak to me, dearest girl? " asked the Earl of Curzon, in a voice stifling with desire. " Ah! you murmur something with those sweet lips of yours, but I cannot catch your words. No matter. I kiss your lips, and you kiss back again! The faithless Editha —

this is almost punishment enough for her perfidy, if she did but know it. But she can not know it — she will never know it. And you will turn against her, dear girl, will you not? Ah! wherefore that impatient ejaculation? Well, I will speak to you no more upon that topic, at least for the present. To-morrow, or another time — Ah! my darling Gertrude, I love you, yes, I love you; and I will forgive your taciturnity, your silence, if you will continue to lavish those tender kisses upon me."

About an hour afterward, when all was still and quiet in the boudoir, some one cautiously unlocked the door and stole forth, closing the door as noiselessly again behind her, but now leaving it unlocked.

The person who thus stole forth was Gertrude; and ascending to her own chamber on the story above, she procured a light. With the candle in her hand, she once more descended; and this time she stole guardedly and with spirit-like tread to the Earl of Curzon's own apartment, — that apartment which he had ere now left to seek the boudoir. In this apartment Gertrude forthwith instituted a minute search, and after some delay she found what she sought concealed amongst the linen in one of the earl's drawers. Joyous as if she had discovered a treasure, and triumphant as if she had just achieved some important victory, the damsel stole up again to her own chamber; and before she retired to rest she set fire to a quantity of papers and threw them into the grate, gaily and cheerfully watching them till they consumed to tinder. She then extinguished the light and laid down to repose.

But in about three hours Gertrude awoke, and it being now daylight, she got up. Having arranged her beautiful hair, so dishevelled and disordered by the prominent adventure of the preceding night, and having refreshed herself with ablutions in the chill water, she put on the plain but neat and becoming apparel of her station. When she had thus concluded her toilet, she went down-stairs to the servants' hall, to wait till her mistress's bell should ring.

The light of the new-born day had already rendered everything plainly visible within the boudoir when the Earl of Curzon awoke from a slumber where the image of Gertrude

had seemed to be strangely mingling with scenes in which his faithless wife and Colonel Malpas also figured. He rubbed his eyes, threw a hasty glance around the room, and on recognizing where he was, all the incidents of the past night came trooping in with rapid march upon his memory. Turning toward his companion, a sudden ejaculation of astonishment and dismay burst from his lips when he encountered the arch and mischievous looks, not of the lovely Gertrude, as he had expected, but of his own wife, the Countess Editha!

"Heavens! what means that exclamation, Charles?" said her ladyship, affecting to be concerned and even terrified at the suddenness of her husband's cry.

"Is it a dream? Can it be a dream?" muttered Curzon, pressing his hand to his brow and endeavouring to concentrate all his thoughts in one focus.

"Have you been labouring under some unpleasant dream?" asked Editha, now assuming a look of tender anxiety, while, at the same time, unperceived by her husband, she pulled the bell-rope that hung behind the curtains of the bed.

"I cannot understand it, it is unaccountable!" said Curzon. Then turning his eyes suddenly upon Editha, he demanded, abruptly, "How came you here?"

"How came I here!" she echoed, with a tone and look of amazement. "Is it not my own room, the boudoir where I sleep when we do not pass the night together? And therefore should I not rather ask how came you here?"

"Perdition! what means it all?" exclaimed the earl. "Am I mad, or have I really been dreaming?"

At this moment the door opened, and Gertrude made her appearance in answer to the summons of the boudoir bell. Her looks were as composed, tranquil, and sedate as if nothing extraordinary had occurred during the past night; and when the earl thus marked her unruffled mien and saw that there was nothing sly, arch, or mischievous therein, he became more bewildered than ever. Again he pressed his hand upon his brow to steady his thoughts, and Gertrude availed herself of that opportunity to dart a sudden look of intelligence at Editha. Then did her ladyship's countenance become lighted up with an expression of joy and triumph, for she understood full well the meaning of

her devoted abigail's glance, and she knew that she was saved.

"Did your ladyship ring?" asked Gertrude, in a tone as tranquil and respectful as usual.

"No," answered Editha. "You can retire."

The abigail accordingly withdrew; but scarcely had the door closed behind her when the Earl of Curzon, starting up in the couch, exclaimed, "Ah! your ladyship has manœuvred well! You were doubtless anxious that a witness should thus behold us together, so that there may be what the lawyers call a condonation on my part in respect to your bygone infidelities."

"My lord, this to me!" exclaimed Editha, her eyes flashing fire, but rather with the triumph that blazed up in her bosom than with the anger which she assumed.

"Yes," continued the Earl of Curzon, springing from the couch and hastily huddling on the slippers, trousers, and dressing-gown in which he had sought that boudoir during the night, "you think, madam, that I am either to be deceived by mystification or overreached by stratagem? That things have occurred which I cannot understand, I do not deny; but you will lean upon a fragile support if you fancy that because I have been seen in your bed after the discovery of your infidelities, I have deprived myself of legal remedy. Ah! fool that I was ever to have fancied that you, issuing from such a precious stock, would do honour to the name of Curzon! But, thank God, I possess the proofs of your infidelities and crimes; and you will perhaps understand me," he added, with a sardonic malignity, "when I declare that to the guilt of adultery have you superadded the black turpitude of forgery."

"My lord!" exclaimed Editha, the richest crimson glowing beneath the soft duskiness of her skin, and mantling thus warmly not only upon the brow and the cheeks, but also the neck, the bare shoulders, and the naked bosom of the patrician lady, "you are a coward thus to insult a defenceless woman. If I had a dagger or a pistol at hand, I would lay you dead at my feet."

"Editha," exclaimed the earl, bending upon her a look in which wonder and scorn, uncertainty and hate, were strangely commingled, "can it be possible that you are unaware of what took place last night? Has there really

been no communion between you and Gertrude? Did I not lock her in this room? And whether you were here concealed at the time, or whether by some means you penetrated hither afterward, in any case must you be aware that your writing-desk furnished me with the proofs of your criminality."

"That you are base enough to ransack my desk, my lord, is probable," cried Editha, the excitement of the scene and the consciousness of her safety inspiring her with all the presence of mind requisite to enact the part of outraged innocence, "but that you discovered in that desk aught whereof I need be ashamed, I positively deny."

"By heavens! this is too much," exclaimed Curzon, his naturally handsome countenance becoming distorted with rage. "The proofs, madam, are in my possession; the note of your accomplice, Lady Lechmere, the forgeries —"

"Coward, liar!" exclaimed Editha, springing like a tigress from the couch. "If there be forgeries in the case, 'tis you have forged them. Ah! doubtless the trammels of matrimony are inconvenient to a man who wishes to pursue his own numerous intrigues, and therefore you seek to get rid of your wife. But no, my lord, I defy you, I defy you!"

The Earl of Curzon now gazed with unmixed astonishment upon Editha. Indeed, for a few moments he was utterly confounded. The tone of confidence in which she spoke, the genuine indignation which appeared to inspire her, the undismayed assurance with which she met his looks, and indeed almost beat them down with her own proud and haughty ones, all this struck the nobleman speechless and motionless. And, heavens! how grandly, how sublimely beautiful seemed the Countess of Curzon at that moment, no longer soft, languishing, and amorous like a dusky houri of Mohammed's paradise, but bursting forth into the personification of Bellona the goddess of war, so that her very beauty became terrible to gaze upon, and the eyes that were wont to burn with the fires of love now shot forth blasting lightnings. With the scant night-dress alone draping her form, her luxuriant purply sable hair flowing in heavy masses over her shoulders and down her back, her heaving bust all exposed in its glowing firmness, one arm gracefully curved, the other extended so as with imperious gesture to enhance the force of her language, her

nude feet and ankles exposed in their sculptural symmetry to the middle of the legs' robust swell, her whole figure, in fine, seemed to realize all that artist ever fancied, poet ever dreamed, or sculptor ever designed in the form of peerless beauty vindicating its outraged innocence.

But, ah! all the glory, the magic, and the sublimity of that scene sink into degradation, shame, and infamy when it is remembered that Editha was really guilty, and that the part which she now enacted was one of consummate duplicity and exquisite hypocrisy. For a few moments, we say, did the Earl of Curzon remain utterly confounded, annihilated, as it were, by the demeanour, the conduct, and the language of his wife. It was either the most stupendous effrontery that woman ever yet had exhibited, or else, if she were innocent, was she the victim of the most extraordinary combination of circumstances ever known. But not long did the Earl of Curzon hesitate between these alternatives. Too much a man of the world to yield a ready credulity to any appearances of innocence, and too deeply conscious of error himself not to be ever ready to believe the errors of others, he soon burst forth into a laugh of bitter scorn, exclaiming, "Ah! I see how it is, madam; you fancy that in your prudence you have destroyed all evidences of your guilt. But your memory fails you, for whatever your intentions might have been, you certainly have not altogether carried them out. I tell you that I possess proofs — "

"Then produce them, my lord," said Editha, in a tone of defiance.

"I will, I will," and he turned toward the door.

"And if you do not," she said, springing forward and detaining him by the arm for a moment, "as a nobleman, a gentleman, a man, — shall I also say as a husband? — it will be your duty — "

"Yes, to fall upon my knees and demand pardon for this outrage, these suspicions," ejaculated Curzon, throwing upon his wife a look of dark malignity, as much as to imply that it was perfect madness to suppose there was any chance of his being compelled to humble himself thus.

"Be it so," she observed, in a tone of confidence, as she released his arm from the firm grasp which her delicate fingers had fixed upon it.

The earl hastened from the boudoir and sped to his own apartment, murmuring to himself, " Now for the proofs that shall overwhelm her with confusion."

He opened the drawer, he tossed aside his linen, but the object of his search was not there. A chill struck to his heart, as the idea of some deep but inexplicable treachery flashed to his mind. Furious with rage, but trembling all over as nervously as if stricken with a palsy, he tore out the drawer from its place and emptied all its contents on the carpet. But the packet which he sought, that packet which contained Lady Lechmere's note and the forged bills, had disappeared.

No wonder, indeed; for it was this same packet which Gertrude had found, and the contents of which she had burned in her own chamber. Yes, and this was the meaning of that significant look which she had flung upon her mistress when entering the boudoir, that look which told Editha she was saved.

Pale, trembling, and overwhelmed, the Earl of Curzon sank into an armchair and gave way to his painful reflections. To believe that all the incidents of the past night belonged only to a dream was ridiculous; but that he had been singularly, mysteriously, and effectually outwitted was evident. He had not a proof, not a single proof, of his wife's guilt, and yet he knew her to be guilty. He had only just come from sharing her couch, and therefore to dream of law proceedings was preposterous. To create an exposure and a scandal by repudiating his wife on bare suspicion, and without being enabled to follow up such an act by the usual legal process, would be only to render himself contemptible as a jealous husband.

Such were the thoughts that passed rapidly through the earl's mind; and perceiving that he was in every way outwitted and deprived of remedy, he suddenly made up his mind to put as good a face as possible upon the matter, — that is to say, for the present. He accordingly returned to the boudoir, where he found Editha combing out her long shining hair. As he entered the room she turned toward him, and with a look full of calm confidence, for all her recent excitement appeared to have cooled down, she said, " Well, my lord, what aspect does the matter now wear? "

" Editha," he responded, assuming a jocular air, " I

must confess that I am completely out-manœuvred. I don't know how, but I think it is tolerably clear that your maid Gertrude is a young woman of no ordinary ability and tact, for which qualities you doubtless value her so much."

"But is it also for the same reason that your lordship seeks to deprive me of her by making her your mistress?" and as Editha gave this bitter retort, her beautiful lips curled with relentless irony.

"Well, I think that the less said upon all these things for the present the better," returned the Earl of Curzon, affecting to laugh; and with these words he was about to quit the room, when Editha caught him by the arm. "What! is there anything more to say?" he demanded.

"Yes," she replied, with firmness of voice and decision of look, "as a nobleman, as a gentleman, and as a husband, you have to apologize for having dared to accuse me without proof."

"Oh, yes, I remember that I pledged myself to some such apology as this; and therefore," he continued, with an air of mock gravity, "I beg to tender my earnest excuses to your ladyship for having ventured to suspect your purity and fidelity; and I may add that I am now entirely convinced that you are as immaculate as a wife can be —"

"Enough!" exclaimed Editha, colouring with indignation, as her husband's tone grew more and more bantering. "You have made the apology, and that is sufficient."

The earl affected to laugh gaily, and quitted the boudoir.

CHAPTER X

MORE MYSTIFICATION

We may now explain to the reader the precise manner in which the Countess of Curzon had been accustomed to manage her intrigues through the agency of Lady Lechmere.

As was particularly the case in those times, with married couples in high life who did not live upon the very best terms together, the Earl and Countess of Curzon frequently occupied separate bedchambers, the earl having an apartment which was called his own private one, and the countess having her boudoir. It was therefore comparatively an easy thing for her ladyship occasionally to stay out all night if she chose, the only precaution needful being to prevent the servants (Gertrude excepted) from discovering the fact. Hence the contrivance into which the reader has already obtained something more than an insight. Thus, for instance, the countess went in full dress and in her own carriage to Lady Lechmere's house; a few hours later Gertrude met her there. Their apparel was speedily changed, and while Gertrude, playing the part of countess, was driven back in the carriage, the countess herself repaired whithersoever she chose. Then, at daybreak, apparelled as Gertrude, the countess would return to the mansion in safety. If seen thus coming home by any of the servants, the supposition was that the young lady's-maid — for whom, of course, Editha would be taken — had passed the night at her parents' house; and on the occasions when these stratagems were to be carried into effect, Gertrude was wont to take the precaution in the evening of casually mentioning in the servants' hall that she had received permission from her mistress to remain with her mother till the following morning.

But there was another phase which the stratagem assumed,

involving a certain alteration of its details, according to circumstances. Thus, for instance, if Editha required an excuse to be absent from home for only a few hours during the evening, she would pretend to have received an invitation from Lady Lechmere to a party; but Gertrude, muffled in Editha's ermine cloak, and perhaps wearing her veil, would proceed in the carriage to Lady Lechmere's, where, instead of any evening party at all, the servants would receive positive orders from their mistress to admit only the Countess of Curzon. Thus Gertrude, disguised as the countess, would be shown up into Lady Lechmere's boudoir, and there remain for two or three hours, as the case might be, until the carriage came to fetch her home again. Thus, all the while, the coachman and lackey attached to Lady Curzon's carriage would naturally suppose that it was their mistress whom they had driven to Lady Lechmere's at eight or nine and fetched home again at twelve or one; while, on the other hand, Lady Lechmere's domestics were equally remote from suspecting that it was any other than the Countess of Curzon who thus came and passed several hours *tête-à-tête* with their mistress.

The reader will now understand the meaning of that note, bearing the signature of Lady Lechmere, which the Earl of Curzon had found in his wife's writing-desk. But wherefore were all those strangely ramified precautions necessary. Because Editha was too prudent to have incurred the risk of allowing either Malpas or Emmerson to pass the night with her in her own boudoir at home; and therefore it was necessary to devise measures to enable her to meet her paramour for the time being at Mrs. Gale's house of accommodation in Soho Square. But of course she could not drive thither openly and fearlessly in her carriage, and when going out of an evening, she could not possibly devise any excuse to dispense with the carriage. She could not say she was going anywhere on foot or that she preferred a hackney-coach. She must therefore seem to use the carriage, even if she did not in reality; hence the astute arrangement of allowing Gertrude to take her place and perform her part, while she herself, modestly disguised in Gertrude's unobtrusive apparel, enjoyed unlimited freedom combined with a rare security.

Having given these few explanations, we now resume the

thread of our narrative. As a matter of course, the Earl of Curzon was not satisfied at the result of the adventures which have occupied the two or three preceding chapters. As we have already stated, he saw that he had been outwitted, but how, he could not altogether conjecture. That Gertrude had purloined the documents from his own apartment he failed not to guess, but the great mystery to him was how his own wife Editha had been his partner of the couch in the boudoir instead of Gertrude. He had assuredly locked the young abigail in that boudoir, and it was her voice which he had subsequently recognized, beyond all possibility of doubt, when he returned to that room later in the night. But while revolving all these things in his mind, he recollected that on seeking the couch in the boudoir, when fancying he was about to be clasped in the arms of Gertrude, he had locked the door; and he likewise recollected that in the morning the door was unlocked when Gertrude entered to ask if her mistress had rung. The door, therefore, had been unlocked by somebody; and if so, the presence of Editha in the couch with him might be easily accounted for by supposing that while he slept Gertrude had risen and changed places with the countess. Then, if this were the case, and if this supposition were the correct one, had the beautiful Gertrude been for any time his companion in that bed? At first he was inclined to believe so, but then he reflected that from the very instant he entered that couch and was clasped in the arms of the female occupying it, this female observed a profound silence, nor could he by coaxing or entreaty succeed in eliciting from her a single word. This circumstance proved, then, that it must have been Editha who was occupying that couch when he entered the room, Editha who received him in her arms, Editha whom he had so fondly and passionately embraced, while all the time fancying that he was enjoying the transports of love in the arms of Gertrude. It was therefore quite clear, from this chain of reasoning, that Editha must have been in the room with Gertrude when he went thither in the dark, and that while Editha prepared to receive him in her arms, Gertrude's voice deluded him into the belief that it was she herself who was the sole occupant of that couch which he sought.

Having come to these conclusions, the Earl of Curzon felt

less satisfied and more piqued than ever. Not only had he been outwitted by his wife in every way, but he was also duped by her abigail. That he was so duped, Editha well knew; and thus the two together, mistress and maid, had not only utterly baffled all his endeavours to establish the proofs of the former's infidelity, but were enabled to have a good laugh together at his expense. Nothing, in fact, could be more ridiculous than the position which he felt he occupied in the eyes not only of Editha, but also of Gertrude, and he was determined to be revenged on them both. Of course, as the master of the house, he could at once have discharged the young lady's-maid; but as there was no ostensible cause to allege for taking such a decisive proceeding upon himself, it would appear most arbitrary and unjust, besides its being a most unusual thing for the husband to interfere with the wife's special dependents. Moreover, the mere discharge of Gertrude would in itself be an act for which she would care so little as to be totally incommensurate with the amount of revenge he sought. She had humbled his pride, she had aided her mistress to baffle and outwit him, and though not naturally of a cowardly character or unmanly disposition, the earl resolved upon some signal and cruel revenge.

The reader will perhaps wonder why he did not call upon Lady Lechmere to see what he could discover relative to his wife's proceedings. But he was too much a man of this world not to know full well that to whatsoever extent Lady Lechmere connived at or assisted Editha's intrigues, she would be prepared to defend and protect them by giving an indignant denial to any accusation on the subject. Besides which, the earl had no idea of proclaiming to the world the ignominious fact that he knew himself to be a cuckold, but could not prove it, and was therefore compelled to endure his wife's infidelities.

There was, however, one person whom he resolved to see, and this was Emmerson. But not for a moment did it strike the earl that the bill-broker had become his wife's paramour. Whether they were even acquainted or not he did not exactly know; but that Emmerson had privately sent her back the bills which she had forged in favour of Colonel Malpas was evident enough. How had this occurrence been brought about? Was Emmerson aware of Editha's guilt,

and if so, to what extent? These were the particulars which the Earl of Curzon was desirous to ascertain; and therefore, after a hurried breakfast, did he mount his horse, and, attended by his groom, repair to the money-making regions of the City.

Mr. Emmerson was seated alone in his private office in Nicholas Lane, pondering somewhat gloomily on the occurrences of the preceding night, and wondering what on earth had been the issue of the adventure. From Editha's lips he had hurriedly heard how her husband had returned and had found the packet of forged bills in her desk, and in a few hastily exchanged sentences they had agreed upon the outline of some tale, to be told by himself, should the earl call on him to demand any explanation of the circumstance of his name being on the back of those forged bills. But whether this story, so hurriedly and imperfectly concocted, would serve any purpose at all, even if the earl should call on him, or whether the discoveries made by his lordship were of too serious and comprehensive a nature to be explained away by sophistry or accounted for by artifice, these were the uncertainties between which Mr. Emmerson was painfully hovering at the moment when the office-boy entered to announce the Earl of Curzon.

Emmerson could not help trembling from head to foot through fear of detection, exposure, and chastisement. But not suffering his emotions to be perceived, he bade the boy at once introduce his lordship. Then, as the earl made his appearance, extending his hand with a sort of affable condescension and aristocratic patronage toward him, he felt persuaded that whatever might have been the issue of the previous night's adventure, he himself remained unsuspected.

"Pray sit down, my lord," said Emmerson, bustling about to hand the nobleman a chair. "Will your lordship take a glass of wine and a biscuit? It is just twelve o'clock, and though perhaps not lunch-time in the fashionable regions whence your lordship has just come — "

"Thank you, Emmerson," said the earl, carelessly. "I have not long breakfasted. But what news in the City? "

"Why, would your lordship believe it, that conceited little humbug, Mr. Undersheriff Fire, has actually got made an alderman; and Tibbs, who has so long managed the

revenues of the ward of Guzzleton, has been obliged to resign at last. But what is the business that has procured me the honour of a call from your lordship this forenoon? "

"You remember, Emmerson," said the earl, "that when I called upon you two or three months ago about some little money matters, you seemed to think that I had a great many promissory notes and bills of exchange in the hands of different persons; and, if I recollect right, I told you at the time that General Beechey, young George Sefton, Paul Dysart, and Colonel Malpas, amongst others, had all asked me to become security for them? "

"I recollect perfectly well the conversation to which your lordship alludes," said Emmerson, who had by this time recovered all his wonted businesslike composure, although he perceived plainly enough into what channel the discourse was about to be turned; but he was ready prepared with the tale agreed upon between himself and Editha.

"Now, it struck me at the time," continued the earl, "that you were rather incredulous when I assured you that I had refused to have anything to do with all those persons."

"I certainly had reason, as I thought," said Emmerson, coolly, "to doubt your lordship's word at the time of which we are speaking; inasmuch as at that very moment when you assured me that you had given no acceptances at all, I had in my cash-box several bills bearing your lordship's name, to the tune of five thousand guineas."

"Ah! " ejaculated the earl, with a sort of subdued chuckle, for he now fancied that he was once more in the right track to bring all her guilt home to the faithless Editha. "I suppose then, Emmerson, you discovered those bills to be forgeries? " he added, inquiringly.

"Yes, my lord, they were forgeries indeed," returned Emmerson, "and it was that scoundrel Malpas who forged them. But I thought that by this time you would have learned — "

"Malpas forged them! " interrupted the earl, looking very hard at the bill-broker. "Surely you must mistake? That he placed them in your hands is one thing, but that he himself perpetrated the forgeries is another."

"In this very office, my lord," said Emmerson, with increasing effrontery, "did Colonel Malpas, when taxed by

me with the forgery, confess his guilt and implore my mercy. Of course I did not wish to send him to the scaffold, and therefore I allowed him to compromise the affair by making a simple debt of it; and for that debt he is now a prisoner in the King's Bench."

"And you therefore gave him up the bills?" said the Earl of Curzon, inquiringly.

"How is this, my lord?" ejaculated Emmerson, with well-assumed astonishment. "Is it possible that your lordship never received those bills — But of course you have, otherwise how could you have obtained any knowledge of the matter at all?"

"Now, pray explain yourself, Emmerson," said the earl, beginning to feel strangely bewildered once more, as if the mystifications of the previous night were to be perpetuated during the day and to follow him from the West End even into the heart of the City.

"The history of the bills is plain and simple enough," returned Emmerson. "I had already endorsed those bills in order to pay them into my banker's hands, when I discovered that they were forgeries. Although willing to avoid instituting a criminal process against Colonel Malpas, and to hush up the matter, I nevertheless thought, on mature reflection, that you ought to be informed of it. I accordingly proceeded to Grosvenor Street to see your lordship on the subject. You were not, however, within, but her ladyship the countess was at home and disengaged. Time being valuable to me, and not choosing to run the chance of calling three or four times without seeing your lordship, I took the liberty of requesting an interview with her ladyship, to whom I explained all that had occurred. Her ladyship was frightened lest the matter should breed some desperate quarrel between Malpas and your lordship, and end in a duel; she therefore suggested that it would be better to allow some little time to elapse, during which she undertook to seize some favourable opportunity to mention the whole transaction guardedly to your lordship. Well satisfied with this proposition, and acknowledging its prudence, I at once declared my readiness to leave the whole matter in the hands of her ladyship. I had not the bills with me at the time, but immediately on my return to Nicholas Lane, I enclosed them to her ladyship in an envelope marked

'Private.' And now, my lord, you have the whole history of the transaction."

"Yes," stammered Curzon, scarcely able to conceal his astonishment at this unexpected explanation, "and I must admit that you acted very handsomely in the business."

"I presume that if the Countess of Curzon has not already mentioned the affair to your lordship, it has been for want of a suitable opportunity or else through oversight."

"I suppose it must be so," remarked Curzon, not knowing what to say and scarcely what to think; but still he was as far as ever from entertaining the remotest suspicion that Emmerson had become his wife's paramour.

Taking his leave, he issued forth from the money-lender's office and was about to remount his horse, when he was suddenly accosted by a well-dressed and good-looking young man whose countenance appeared to be familiar to him.

"My lord," said this individual, "will you excuse me for venturing to give your lordship a piece of advice? But I conjure you to be careful in your dealings with that hypocritical miscreant Emmerson —"

"Ah!" ejaculated the earl, "the advice is startling, but perhaps well meant. Who are you? I have seen your face before."

"Your lordship has seen me in that very office," was the response, and the young man glanced over his shoulder toward the door of Emmerson's place of business.

"Yes, I recollect you now," exclaimed the earl. "Your name is Varian."

"And if the world has heard of my crimes, it knows little of my misfortunes," said the young man, bitterly. "If I were a culprit who deserved transportation, then that villain Emmerson is a man for whom even hanging is too good."

"We cannot converse here, at Emmerson's very door," said the earl, "and it is absolutely necessary that I should hear all you may have to unfold concerning your late master. Will you accompany me into some adjacent tavern?"

"No, my lord, not now," answered Varian. "Having received a full pardon, I avail myself of the first leisure moment to come hither and seek an interview with the villain Emmerson in order to tax him with all his infamy and overwhelm him with reproaches. This is the beginning

of the deadly revenge which I have sworn to wreak upon that man, — a vengeance which will be accomplished by unmasking him to all with whom he has any dealings. Hence the liberty I have taken in accosting your lordship now — "

"Then will you call upon me at my own house, Mr. Varian?" asked the earl.

"I will, my lord," and with these words Theodore turned abruptly away and entered the bill-broker's office.

The Earl of Curzon then mounted his horse which his groom had been holding at a little distance, and, riding back to the West End, he proceeded to Carlton House for the purpose of calling upon Lady Sackville.

CHAPTER XI

ROYALTY'S FAVOURITE

Venetia, elegantly dressed in morning negligee, was seated upon the sofa with the prince regent, in her magnificent saloon at Carlton House.

His Royal Highness was gazing with the mingled ardour and languor of a passion which had been crowned with success, but which was nevertheless subjected to renewed excitement every time he found himself in contact with that woman of transcendent beauty. Thus, while he experienced the voluptuous languor of gratified desires, he at the same time felt the flaming up of fresh longings in his soul. For it was impossible to be sated with the pleasures that were experienced in the arms of Venetia. Her beauty was so grand, and at the same time so enchanting, — her fascinations were so irresistible as well as so varied, — that it was no wonder if she had obtained, in the short period of a few weeks, a more despotic empire than any woman had ever achieved before over the mind of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent.

Although in reality hating, abhorring, and detesting her lover, — despising him as a man, and loathing him as a paramour, — she nevertheless dissembled her heart's true feelings with such consummate success that the prince actually believed himself to be the object of her devoted affections. And no wonder; for with such matchless duplicity she lavished upon him the tenderest caresses; and while she developed all the sensual blandishments of her naturally amorous disposition in order to render herself adorable as a mistress, she also studied to render available those qualifications which made her estimable as a friend. Thus was it that the prince was gradually led to consult her in respect

to political affairs and state questions; and he could not help observing that she was always pleased to express an opinion and proffer her advice on those points as if they had previously formed the subject of her reflections. Whether her inspirations in these respects came from the intuitive promptings of her own intelligence, or from the suggestions of her husband, or from any other quarter, we cannot now say. Certain it is, however, that the advice which she thus gave was gradually beginning to wield a marked influence upon the prince; the more so, inasmuch as she always spoke deferentially and not dictatorially, and with the air of a disinterested friend instead of that of a selfish, narrow-minded mistress.

On the present occasion, when we find Venetia and the prince seated together upon the sofa, the conversation had been turning upon certain minor appointments in the civil and diplomatic departments which had to be filled up. A list of the names proposed respectively by the Foreign and Home Secretaries of State had been submitted to his Royal Highness, and this list now lay upon a table near the sofa.

"Well, my dearest Venetia," said the prince, "you have not given me your opinion relative to those names, and you know that I value your advice too much not to avail myself of it."

"My dear prince, you do me honour," answered Venetia, flinging upon his Royal Highness the sweetest smiles, as a Hebe might be supposed to scatter the choicest flowers upon the god of her adoration. "There are about twenty names in that list," she continued, taking up the paper and scanning it deliberately, "and I must confess that I consider some of the proposed appointments injudicious to a degree."

"Can you suggest more suitable ones, Venetia?" asked the prince, in a careless sort of way, as he toyed with one of her fair hands.

"Let me see," exclaimed the lady, tapping him on the cheek, and then taking his gold pencil-case from his waistcoat pocket. "Here, my dear George, is the post of first attaché to the embassy in Spain about to be offered to Mr. Drummond, whereas Mr. Arthur Fitzherbert should decidedly have the preference."

"Why, he is the cousin by marriage of Mrs. Fitzherbert," exclaimed the prince, "and I have told you on three or

four occasions already that I have no reason to be pleased with that lady or with any of her connections."

"Now, my dear prince, you are not acting sensibly or justly," said Venetia, turning toward him and placing one of her taper fingers upon his lip as if to prevent him from speaking further for the moment. Then, as she poured upon him the golden flood of her radiant looks, she continued to observe, "If you have been enabled so readily to forget, or rather to repent of your ancient connection with Mrs. Fitzherbert, must I not fear that when wearied of me, you will case to think of your poor Venetia with love and affection?"

"Never, never, my heart's darling," cried the prince, throwing his arms around her neck and drawing her toward him. Then, as her superb bosom heaved and swelled against his chest, he said, "Ah! dearest Venetia, there is a great difference between our connection and that which subsisted between me and Mrs. Fitzherbert. You are faithful to me — you will always be faithful; whereas she went to France, intrigued with the Marquis of Bellois, and became a mother by him; then, on returning to England, she flew back to my arms, vaunting as it were her fidelity toward me, — a fidelity in which for a time I was idiot enough to believe. Nor was the French marquis her only paramour — Oh, I have had many and signal proofs of her scandalous infidelities and depravities! And now, therefore, can you wonder if, notwithstanding the tenderness of my original connection with Mrs. Fitzherbert, I have been alienated from her for nearly twenty years?"

"All this is no doubt true enough, my dear George," said Venetia, redoubling the apparent ardour of her caresses and lavishing a thousand seeming proofs of tenderness upon her royal paramour, in order the more effectually to rivet the silken bonds and flowery fetters in which her fascinations held his soul captive. "But nevertheless," she continued, "you must not visit upon any of Mrs. Fitzherbert's relations the vindictive sentiments which you may experience toward herself."

"Ah! even if I were inclined to do so, you would take care, my wily charmer, effectually to prevent it," and as the prince thus spoke in a jocular manner, he indulged in delicious toyings and amorous dalliances with his beauteous mistress.

"Why, dearest Venetia," he continued, in a languid tone, "there are no less than three or four of Mrs. Fitzherbert's relatives whom you have positively been the means of appointing to excellent posts within the last month."

"And yet, my dear George, you cannot attribute any sinister motives to me," said Venetia, "in having thus persuaded you to perform what I have conceived to be mere acts of justice?"

"Sinister motives!" echoed the prince. "Those, dearest girl, I should never think of attributing to you. But really you must have a marvellously refined sense of justice thus to intercede in behalf of the relatives of a lady whom, if she could reconquer her lost influence over me, you would have to regard as a rival."

"Not so, my dear George," exclaimed Venetia, with one of her sweetest smiles, "for if I mistake not, Mrs. Fitzherbert is now nearly sixty."

"True," ejaculated the prince, "and the twenty years which have elapsed since last I saw her have no doubt made a wonderful alteration in her person. But tell me candidly, dear Venetia, do you know her?"

"You have already asked me this question three or four times," responded Lady Sackville, tapping his cheek playfully, "and I have as frequently assured you that I have never even seen Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"But has she not written to solicit your good offices on behalf of her pauper relatives?" asked the prince.

"No, on my honour she has not," replied Venetia, in a firm tone and with decisive look.

"Then it is really through kind and generous motives that you thus interest yourself in the matter?" observed his Royal Highness, interrogatively.

Again Venetia gave an emphatic answer in the affirmative.

"Well, you siren charmer," said the prince, completely yielding to the blandishments, the seductive wiles, and the irresistible fascinations to which he was subjected not merely in the society but from the close contact of that woman of transcendent beauty, "you must have your own way in all things. Therefore, as I hate being troubled with those official lists, do you take the pencil and make what alterations therein you may think fit. I will at once affix

my initials, and then the paper can go back to the Minister. So do this at once, Venetia, and then, instead of talking any more on business, which you know I hate, we will converse on the power, the influence, and the delights of love."

"The most delicious of topics," exclaimed Venetia, flinging a glance full of voluptuous tenderness upon the prince. Then gliding away from his side for a few moments, she sat down on a chair at the table and made several erasures and alterations in the list of names.

"Now for my initials," said the prince, also rising from the sofa and stooping over Venetia's shoulder when he observed her lay down the pencil-case. Then seating himself by her side, he was about to sign the document, when his looks settled upon a particular name that figured therein. "Heydey!" he cried, "what is Captain Bathurst doing in this list?"

"I should have thought," said Venetia, with a charming smile of mingled deprecation and persuasion, "that the brother of your old friend, Miss Bathurst of Stratton Street, might have some little claim upon your royal notice — "

"But for years past, my beloved Venetia," exclaimed the prince, "I have positively refused to do any more for that Bathurst family, always, as a matter of course, excepting Horace, your complaisant husband, dear Venetia," he added, with a smile.

"Do not for a moment think that Horace has instigated me," exclaimed Lady Sackville, "to become the means of providing for his relatives or connections. I do this of my own accord, and simply because I consider — "

"Well, well," interrupted the prince, "you and I will not quarrel about trifles, and therefore you shall have your own way."

With these words his Royal Highness affixed his initials to the document; and this being done, the prince and his lovely mistress continued to discourse for the next hour upon an infinite variety of pleasing nothings and charming trifles, which however the sprightliness of Venetia invested with ineffable attractions. At the end of the hour the prince was compelled to leave her in order to assist at some ceremony connected with his high office, and Venetia retired to her boudoir.

Scarcely had she reached that chamber — so elegantly

and at the same time so tastefully fitted up, and seeming in every way so well adapted for the mysteries of love — when Jessica entered to announce that the Earl of Curzon requested an immediate interview with her ladyship.

"Ah! he is returned then from France," murmured Venetia to herself; and she immediately ordered Jessica to hasten and introduce the nobleman to the boudoir.

For upwards of half an hour did the Earl of Curzon remain alone with Venetia in earnest conversation; but relative to the nature of their discourse we need not at present offer any explanations. Suffice it to say, that it was no topic of tenderness or love which thus engaged their profound attention; and although, when rising to depart, the earl ventured to breathe his hopes that the night of bliss which he had spent in that boudoir was not destined to be the only one, Venetia gave him but a few hurried and vague though apparently tender assurances, and Curzon, snatching a kiss from her delicious lips, took his leave of the beauteous creature.

On being again left alone, Lady Sackville sat down to pen a long letter; and scarcely had she concluded it when Jessica once more entered to announce a visitor. This time it was Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and Venetia at once desired the baronet to be admitted to her presence.

CHAPTER XII

THE BARONET — THE MARQUIS

The reader will be pleased to remember that Sir Douglas Huntingdon had obtained the pardon of Theodore Varian through the medium of Lady Sackville. On the occasion when he called upon her for this purpose, he had explained all his adventures at Shooter's Hill, — everything that regarded Ariadne, — concluding with the description of this young damsel's death. The reader will likewise recollect that Venetia had listened to him with a glitter of something like jealous uneasiness in her eyes; but that when she found the baronet speaking of Ariadne only as an object of compassion, Venetia's countenance brightened up. Lastly, it must be remembered that when he described Ariadne's death, — as the trance was then supposed to be, — Venetia had murmured to herself a few words expressive of a wish that the day of retribution might sooner or later overtake the Marquis of Leveson.

More than a week had now elapsed since that interview between Lady Sackville and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and during this interval the baronet had not called again at Carlton House. Venetia was therefore ignorant of the circumstance of Ariadne's restoration to life, which indeed had only taken place a couple of days previous to the one whereof we are now writing, and we should observe that the interest and the gold of the Marquis of Leveson had succeeded in keeping the circumstance out of the newspapers of the day.

"You must have thought that something fatal had happened to me," observed the baronet, as he entered the boudoir; "that is to say, if you condescend to devote a moment's thought to me at all?"

"My dear Douglas," said Venetia, motioning him to take

a seat upon the sofa by her side, "you are aware that whatever my failings may be, a ridiculous affectation is not one of them; and therefore I will candidly confess that I have been both surprised and grieved to think that you have allowed nine or ten days to pass without coming near me."

"Ah! do not chide me, dear Venetia," said the baronet, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips. "You are aware that I have had much to annoy me — much to occupy my attention — "

"Your mansion was burned down," observed Venetia, "and that was certainly enough to cause you much vexation. But you are rich, and the loss can soon be repaired. Wherefore, then, seem so dull, so melancholy, so pensive? It is not natural — Ah! I understand you now," she abruptly exclaimed, withdrawing her hand as suddenly; "the death of that poor girl whom you picked up at Shooter's Hill has affected you more than you choose to admit."

"You will be surprised, Venetia," said the baronet, "to learn that the poor girl, of whom you speak, is not dead, after all."

"What mean you?" cried Venetia, gazing upon the baronet with unfeigned wonder. "Did you not tell me that she was no more, that she had died through the brutality of the Marquis of Leveson — "

"'Tis an amazing and extraordinary history altogether," interrupted the baronet. "In a word, Ariadne Varian was plunged into a profound trance, from which she was miraculously awakened the day before yesterday."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon then proceeded to recite those particulars connected with the damsel's resuscitation, which are already known to the reader, and which were fraught with so wild, so romantic, and yet so deep an interest.

"And where is Miss Varian now?" asked Venetia, profoundly amazed at all that she had just heard.

"She was last evening removed," answered the baronet, "under the care of my housekeeper Mrs. Baines, to apartments which have been taken for the purpose in a secluded and quiet neighbourhood. It was at first thought requisite to allow her to remain for a few days at Leveson House; but the indignity she had endured beneath that roof and the horrors to which that outrage had led produced such an effect upon her mind that the physicians were compelled to consent

to her removal thus speedily. Her brother is with her in her new abode — "

"And doubtless Sir Douglas Huntingdon will be a constant visitor there?" interrupted Venetia, with a slight movement indicative of annoyance, and with a look that was the least thing piqued and pouting.

"Ah! 'tis cruel thus to suspect the fidelity of a heart devoted to your charms," exclaimed the baronet, sinking upon his knees at Venetia's feet. "But I will confess that this strange episode of which Ariadne Varian is the heroine has produced a singular — and indeed unpleasant — effect upon my mind. It has unsettled me; it has thrown a damp as it were upon my spirits; it has rendered me restless and uneasy — "

"My dear Douglas," observed Venetia, the colour mounting to her cheeks, as she bent her beauteous head toward the baronet, who knelt at her feet, "you are in love with that girl, and you are now, with wonderful ingenuousness, confessing to me all the minute symptoms of your passion."

"No, Venetia, no," exclaimed Sir Douglas, starting from his knees and resuming his place by her side upon the sofa. "Even if I may have fancied so for a moment, it was but a dream. Indeed, I experienced a boundless compassion — an illimitable sympathy — for that poor girl, who saved my life at the murderers' hut, and whom circumstances thus so singularly placed in my care."

"I tell you, Douglas," interrupted Venetia, gently repulsing his hand as he attempted to take hers, — "I tell you that you love Ariadne Varian! And why should you not? If she be beautiful and amiable and good, she is doubtless worthy of your affection — "

"What? the sister of a poor clerk!" ejaculated the baronet; "and he a man whom the law has branded and whom society will ever regard as an outcast, although the royal prerogative, influenced by your goodness, has pardoned him!"

"But are you not the master of your own actions?" inquired Venetia, bending down her eyes. "And may you not, if you choose, marry this girl, obscure and humble though she be? As for her brother's unhappy position, wherefore should she suffer for his errors?"

"Oh, it is useless thus to argue the point, Venetia," cried

Sir Douglas Huntingdon, somewhat impatiently; "for I tell you that I love not Ariadne Varian."

"And I, who perhaps know the human heart better than you," returned Venetia, "in spite of all your worldly experience, I tell you, I say, that you do love her, and in the recesses of your soul there is at this moment a voice which echoes the assertion I have just made. Now, my dear Douglas," she observed, looking suddenly up with a kind and amiable expression of countenance, "the feeling that must henceforth subsist between you and me is friendship — and nothing more."

"Ah! cruel Venetia," exclaimed the baronet, "have you not given me other hopes? Have you not filled my heart with the paradise of blissful expectations? And now will you render that heart a desert?"

"No, believe me, dear Douglas," rejoined Venetia, with an amiable smile, "your heart will not be a desert, for it will be filled with the image of Ariadne Varian."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon was about to make some reply, and urge the assurance that the image of Venetia alone occupied his heart, when Jessica again made her appearance in the boudoir.

"The Marquis of Leveson," she said, "requests an immediate interview with your ladyship. His lordship told the footman that he had some business of importance to communicate to your ladyship, and he is now waiting in the drawing-room."

"Ah! I think that I can guess the nature of Lord Leveson's business," observed Venetia, with a look of indescribable vexation, as she turned toward Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "You, my dear friend, who have so recently become acquainted with all my secrets, and who therefore understand my exact position so well, — you, I say, can see at a glance how it is that circumstances have to some extent placed me in the power of the Marquis of Leveson."

"Yes, dearest Venetia," replied the baronet, "I understand what you mean. But is he not to some extent in my power? Have I not the means of subjecting both himself and his niece to a terrific exposure? Louisa first — Ariadne next — Oh, the villain, if he dare use menaces to coerce you, Venetia, I will defend you, I will protect you, I will save you from his power."

"Ten thousand thanks, dear friend, for these assurances," exclaimed Venetia, now of her own accord grasping that hand which she had a few minutes previously repulsed. "But shall I see the marquis?"

"By all means," rejoined the baronet; "let us at once ascertain what it is that he requires. After all, it is possible that you may be mistaken as to the object of his visit — "

"No, no," interrupted Venetia, impetuously, "I am convinced that it is with no friendly object he has come hither. Persevering and energetic in accomplishing his aims, insatiable in his sensual longings, no sooner has one intended victim escaped from his toils, when he flies in pursuit of another — "

"Then, all things considered," exclaimed the baronet, "you would do well to receive the marquis here; and permit me to remain an unseen witness of the interview, either to be near to protect you from present insult, or to learn those particulars that shall guide my actions for your future rescue."

"Be it as you say," rejoined Venetia. Then, turning to Jessica, she said, "Let the marquis be conducted hither."

The lady's-maid, who had been permitted to hear the preceding colloquy because she was well acquainted with all the secrets of her mistress, hastily withdrew; and the moment the door had closed, Sir Douglas Huntingdon ensconced himself behind that selfsame screen which on a former occasion had served for his hiding-place. Lady Sackville hastened to compose her features and settle herself as it were with a becoming dignity upon the sofa, in order to receive the Marquis of Leveson; and accordingly, in a few minutes, the nobleman was ushered into the boudoir.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he exclaimed, advancing toward Venetia, "to be admitted into the very bower of love and beauty, the mysterious scene of all ineffable fascinations — "

"Was it for the purpose of indulging in this absurd rhapsody that your lordship sent so pressing a demand for an audience?" and as Venetia thus spoke, with a quiet sarcasm in her accents and a subdued contemptuousness in her looks, she rose from the sofa as much as to imply that she wished the interview to be already at an end.

"Your ladyship is severe — too severe," observed the

marquis, with a malignant glance, which seemed to infer that the hour of his triumph was drawing near. Then, with a low bow he asked, " Is it your ladyship's pleasure that I should remain standing? "

" Oh, assuredly not," exclaimed Venetia, with a glance which seemed to fling back the defiance of his lordship's looks. " Pray be seated," and she herself resumed her place upon the sofa.

The marquis fixed his eyes steadily upon Lady Sackville; and as with one comprehensive look he embraced all the transcending charms of this woman of matchless beauty, he thought within himself that no daring was too desperate and no measure too extreme for adoption on the part of one who would seek to gain that glorious prize.

" It is scarcely necessary for me to observe," he said after a pause, during which Venetia made a very evident gesture of impatience not unmingled with disgust at finding herself thus the object of his lustfully gloating looks, " it is scarcely necessary for me to observe," he said, " that I have too many reasons to fear that I am no special favourite with your ladyship, and yet I am one of your ladyship's most enthusiastic admirers."

" Your admiration, my lord, considering all that has taken place," she replied, with a deeply meaning look, " is little flattering to me."

" It is true, my dear Lady Sackville," he continued, totally unabashed, " that when inveigled into one of my mechanical chairs, you well-nigh paid the penalty of that curiosity which led you to penetrate into those private apartments — "

" Dare you allude to those chambers of infamy? " ejaculated Venetia, her eyes flashing fire. " But, ah! my lord, I could have forgiven you for all that you thus attempted toward me, but when I think of how nearly that innocent girl — "

" I understand full well what you mean," interrupted Lord Leveson, with another malignant look, " and it is precisely because I do thus understand you that I have taken it into my head to call upon your ladyship at the present moment. Of course, having been to Stratton Street, I am well aware — "

" We need not repeat things which are mutually known,"

suddenly interrupted Venetia. "Indeed, I am anxious that this interview should be cut as short as possible. State therefore the business that has brought you hither — "

"The explanation shall be given as curtly — and I may almost add as imperiously — as it is demanded," replied Lord Leveson.

"Speak, then," ejaculated Venetia, "and trifle not with my time, which appears to be more precious than yours. What is the nature of your business? "

The marquis fixed his eyes with the steadiness of a firm resolution upon the glowing countenance of Venetia, who was now truly grand, truly magnificent in her haughty indignation; and in a slow, measured, and determined tone, he said, "My business here is to demand when it will suit Lady Sackville either to admit me to her boudoir as the partner of her couch, or to pass the night with me at Leveson House? "

A torrent of bitter reproaches and terrible invectives rose to the very tip of Venetia's tongue, as these words, so tremendously insulting, met her ear; but with an effort of surpassing energy, she suddenly stifled those syllables of rage and fury to which her lips were on the point of giving utterance. With the excruciating pang which that preter-human effort caused her, she became deadly pale, and her bosom, a moment before heaving and falling with rapid palpitations, became instantaneously stilled, as if the proudly swelling globes had suddenly changed into that alabaster which they resembled.

"And are you base enough, are you vile enough, to use the means in your power, in order to enforce a response favourable to your wishes? " she asked, her eyes now burning with a lurid light as they were fixed steadfastly upon him.

"If the sacrifice of my soul were at stake," responded the marquis, "I would not abandon this proceeding of love and vengeance. Ah! " he cried, with a gloating and yet malignant look, "I hate you as much as I adore you. Your beauty ravishes me, enchants me, drives me mad; and I would surrender all hopes of heaven for one hour of bliss and pleasure in your arms. But on the other hand, think you that I have not a vengeance to wreak for that terrible explosion of wrath, fury, and invective which you poured upon me on the occasion when you plunged me into the prisonage

of that chair from which I was drivelling idiot enough to release you? Think you that I have forgotten the storm of reproaches — the tempest of upbraidings — which, though sweeping forth from the lips of an angel of beauty, were withering and blighting as if they came from the tongue of a hideous fiend? Oh, now, haughty beauty that you are, — cunning intriguer that I have discovered you to be, — I will revel in your charms and make my very love my vengeance."

Venetia remained calm and immovable as Lord Leveson thus assailed her with all the lashing, scourging power of the language of menace; but still the lurid light shone in her eyes, and it was evident that her composure was of that terrible kind which is produced by utter desperation. At length, when the marquis had done speaking, her lips wavered for a moment, but no words came forth, they were stifled as it were in her very throat. But suddenly recollecting what she had for the last few minutes forgotten, namely, that Sir Douglas Huntingdon heard all that passed and had promised to rescue her, she experienced an instantaneous buoyancy of the spirit and a brightening up of the countenance; for the thought now struck her that she might not only be saved from the embraces of that loathsome old man, but also revenged upon him for this and other wrongs.

Again there was a wavering of her lips, and this time the words which she meant to speak came forth.

"To-morrow night," she said, in a low deep tone, "at eleven o'clock punctually, I will call at Leveson House. But, my lord, as my reputation is now to be placed completely in your power, may I hope that it will be held sacred?"

"However great a villain a man may be in his endeavours to obtain possession of a woman," answered the marquis, "he does not usually trumpet forth his success. And as for the revenge which I cherish against you, it will be fully wreaked when you sink a victim into the arms of my consummated desires. Therefore, as a nobleman, as a gentleman, and as a man, I swear by everything solemn and sacred that the secret of your surrender shall be retained in my breast as inviolably and profoundly as if it reposed only with the dead."

Having thus spoken, the Marquis of Leveson made a low bow, turned abruptly away, and quitted the boudoir.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon now emerged from behind the screen. Venetia, pale, marble pale, with concentrated passion, trembling from head to foot, and with her fair hands firmly clenched, had risen from the sofa and was standing before the looking-glass, surveying herself with evident astonishment at the violence of her own emotions as expressed in her countenance.

" It is not worth while to expend so much splendid indignation upon such a wretch," observed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, taking her hand, which she now willingly abandoned to him. " To-morrow night you shall go to Leveson House; but I will follow you thither. A few minutes after you have entered, will I present myself at the door and demand admission. If it be refused, I will enforce it; and when once confronted with the marquis, I will threaten him with the fullest exposure of his conduct toward Ariadne, unless he solemnly undertakes to observe eternal peace and silence with regard to you."

" Now you are indeed my best, my dearest friend," said Venetia, gazing tenderly upon the baronet.

" Ah! would that I could again induce you to believe that I love you, and you alone? " he murmured, pressing her hand to his lips.

" Yes, I shall esteem your conduct of to-morrow night as a proof of love," observed Venetia, her look now assuming an expression of soft wantonness, " and any reward that you may claim — "

" I understand you, dearest," cried the baronet, joyfully; and flinging his arms around her, he pressed his lips to hers in one long delicious kiss.

A minute afterward the baronet quitted the boudoir.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GLASS DOOR

Passing down the long passage into which opened the various apartments allotted to Lord and Lady Sackville, Sir Douglas Huntingdon reached the principal landing, when it suddenly struck him that as he had not been at Carlton House for nearly ten days, he ought to pay his respects to the prince, if only for a few moments. For be it recollected that the baronet was one of George's boon companions, and his Royal Highness, being excessively touchy and remarkably sensitive on certain points, would have felt annoyed on learning that Sir Douglas had been to the palace and quitted it again without seeing him. The baronet accordingly asked a page who stood on the principal landing where his Royal Highness was, and how engaged.

"His Royal Highness, sir," was the reply, "not many minutes since passed this way along the passage, toward the saloon at the end, and I believe that his Royal Highness is at this moment alone there."

"Then I will seek him in that apartment," said the baronet; and, turning upon his heel, he proceeded along the passage.

The page offered no further remark, much less any remonstrance, as he knew that Sir Douglas was not only most intimate with the prince, but enjoyed, so to speak, the "run of the palace."

At the end of the long passage was the antechamber with the glass door at which Sir Douglas and Venetia had first exchanged tender looks, on that special occasion when the prince diverted himself with certain young and nobly born ladies in the magnificent saloon with which that glass door communicated. Traversing the antechamber, the baronet

at once entered the saloon, which, as we have before stated, was furnished in the most luxurious style, and was decorated by numerous chandeliers and lamps.

Closing behind him the glass door with the crimson blinds, Sir Douglas looked around in expectation of beholding his Royal Highness, but the prince was not there. Indeed, the baronet saw no one, and he was about to retreat when he noticed that a side door stood open. His acquaintance with Carlton House was so intimate that he knew full well that this door was a secret one communicating with a staircase having a private outlet toward the park; and indeed the baronet himself had frequently been present at scenes in the magnificent saloon to which that convenient mode of communication had furnished the accessories of frail female beauty.

Seeing, therefore, this little door now standing open, the baronet immediately felt assured that some pleasant diversion or intrigue was in progress, and for a moment he felt disposed to wait and see whether he should be " one too many " in the expected pastime. But recent events had somewhat steadied his character and sobered his inclinations, and on second thoughts he resolved to retreat from the danger of being lured into some scene of licentiousness or debauch. He accordingly withdrew, closing the glass door with the crimson blinds. But, obedient to some sudden impulse of curiosity, he lingered for a moment to peep back into the saloon, just to see whether the prince was returning. At the same instant the figure of a man emerged from the secret doorway on the opposite side of the saloon, and, to his unspeakable amazement, Sir Douglas Huntingdon instantaneously recognized the man whom he had first encountered at the Jolly Wagoner's, and whom Nell Gibson had afterward described to him as being the public executioner.

So stupefied was Sir Douglas Huntingdon on observing this man in Carlton House that he was transfixed, as it were, to the spot, his looks still plunging through the glass door into the saloon. Immediately behind the Hangman followed the prince, his Royal Highness having lingered for a few moments in the rear to fasten the door at the foot of the staircase, which had a secret spring known only to himself and a few of his most intimate friends, male and female.

Mr. Daniel Coffin was not only attired in his Sunday's

best, but had evidently endeavoured to make himself look as smart and as respectable as possible. Nevertheless nothing could materially mitigate the hangdog expression of his countenance, and the baronet could perceive that the prince, though endeavouring to maintain an air of dignified hauteur, was profoundly disgusted at being in the company of such a man.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon was determined, if possible, to ascertain what earthly business the prince regent of the kingdom could have to transact with the public executioner. The liveliest curiosity had seized upon the baronet, and at any risk of discovery as an eavesdropper was he resolved to gratify it. Seeing by the manner in which the prince stopped short in the middle of the saloon and leaned against a chair, that he intended to hold his interview with the Hangman in that apartment, Sir Douglas kept his post at the glass door, through which he could obtain a view of all that passed; and by cautiously and gently opening it the least possible distance, he was enabled to overhear the greater portion of the conversation which transpired.

" Now, my man," said the prince, " be so good as to tell me at once what it is you want with me. I received, with how much astonishment I leave you to guess, the precious specimen of orthography and penmanship which you sent me, begging this interview — "

" Yes, and I received, too, the private message your Royal Highness sent by a gentleman in plain clothes," observed the Hangman, " and I felt very much obliged at being told that I might come here on this day and at this hour, to have the honour of talking to your Highness."

" Well, now you are here," observed the prince, with ill-concealed impatience, " and the sooner you explain your business the better."

" If your Royal Highness means me to speak in such a hurry," observed Coffin, " I shall be so flurried — "

" Well, take your own time, then," exclaimed the prince, throwing himself in the chair upon the back of which he had been leaning, " and I will listen to you as patiently as I can."

" Well, my lord, — I mean Royal Highness, — you must let me go back to the beginning," resumed the Hangman. " You know that day when you and Lady Ernestina Dysart found me locked fast in that queer-fashioned chair at Leveson

House; and then your Royal Highness told me that if I would help you and her ladyship in the scheme you had in hand to get rid of Mr. Dysart, you would give me a couple of hundred guineas. Of course I snapped at the bargain. Two hundred guineas wasn't to be sneezed at; and then, too, you promised that the sheriff should be empowered to offer a free pardon to any man who would accept the office of Jack Ketch. All this suited me uncommon well, and on the day of execution I transmogrified myself into a black fellow, so as to mix unknown and unrecognized in the crowd. All went on right enough; the sheriff made the proclamation, and I volunteered. My eyes! what a shout the people gave! How frightened they was of being balked of the hanging-show! And I dare say they felt uncommon grateful to the blessed institutions of this country that always ensure them kings or prince regents or queens that are fond of sending their subjects to be tucked up like dogs."

"Spare your comments, fellow," interrupted the prince, sternly, "and proceed with what you have to say, though for the life of me I cannot understand why you are recapitulating all these incidents."

"Well, my lord, — I mean Royal Highness," again resumed Coffin, not exactly heeding the last comment of the prince, "when once reinstated in my pleasant office of public executioner, I went into Dysart's cell and helped yours and Lady Ernestina's scheme most admirably. I plummed Dysart that I had seen the reprieve, heard it read, and had particularly marked the private instructions which directed that it was not to be produced until the very moment the drop was ready to fall. In fact, I did what you told me, — which was to buoy him up with hope until the very last, so as not to allow any suspicion to enter his mind or any misgiving to excite a vindictive feeling. So you may thank me, my lord, — I mean Royal Highness, — and Lady Ernestina too may thank me for amusing Dysart's mind in such a way that he did not see through the trick at the very last and blurt forth to the sheriffs or the chaplain all about your Royal Highness's amour with his wife and about the written document you so solemnly signed. For even if you had not told the Home Secretary, as I suppose you did, to write an official letter to the sheriff of London about preventing last dying speeches on the scaffold, I should

have been able to have managed the business all pleasant enough for you, and have eased Dysart's journey out of the world as comfortably as possible."

"Now I conceive you must have brought your long narrative to a conclusion," said the prince, "and perhaps you will tell me why you have entered into all these particulars."

"Just to show your Royal Highness how faithfully I behaved," responded the Hangman, with a tone and manner of coarse effrontery, "and how well I followed out all your instructions."

"I do not deny it," observed the prince, to whom it was gall and wormwood to permit the prolongation of the interview, "but did I not remit you the two hundred guineas which I promised by the hands of a confidential valet, — the same who called upon you yesterday?"

"There's no denying that the two hundred guineas came safe enough," returned the Hangman, "but, on mature reflection, I can't help thinking my services were but indifferently paid. If it had been a commoner or even a lord who had employed me, well and good; but for a Royal Highness, a prince regent, almost a king and defender of the faith into the bargain, as the inscription on the money says, to give such a paltry fee as two hundred guineas — "

"You scoundrel," exclaimed the prince, now goaded to an intolerable degree of excruciation, "how dare you thus pollute all the sacred names of royalty?"

"I have no doubt," observed the Hangman, his own effrontery becoming all the more coolly determined and doggedly resolute in proportion as he perceived that the prince grew excited, — because in his heart, like the millions of the people, he had a natural and bitter hatred against everything belonging to monarchy and royalty, — "I have no doubt," he said, "that you think I am precious free and precious impudent, but it matters deuced little to me what you do think. Perhaps you will tell me I am a thief? I should very soon answer that you, who wring the last farthing out of the people in the shape of taxation to support your luxuries and debaucheries, are quite as much a robber in your way — "

"Enough of this," cried the prince, deeply humiliated and bitterly repenting the day when he placed himself

in the power of such a diabolical ruffian. "What is it you require of me? What do you want?"

"Well," returned the Hangman, unable to resist the opportunity for another jest, "I might in reason ask your Royal Highness to create me a duke or a marquis, for there's many a man quite as bad as I am raised to the peerage for doing the dirty work of royalty. But my tastes don't exactly go that way. I like money better than titles."

"Ah! then you want money?" said the prince, eagerly catching at the means of getting rid of this dreadful visitor.

"Well, I should have thought you might long ago have guessed this much. The fact is," continued Coffin, "I am going to scrape together as much money as I possibly can get, for the purpose of emigrating to America."

"Oh, then I shall cheerfully assist you," exclaimed the prince, the sudden relief which this announcement gave him producing an expression of joy upon his features. "How much do you require?"

"Well, I don't think your Royal Highness could expect me to do with less than five hundred guineas."

"You shall have that amount," said the prince, "but I cannot give it you now. In a few days you may rely upon receiving it. But how is it to be conveyed to you? I cannot send my valet to your residence any more; it compromises me too much in his eyes. Nor can I allow you to come hither again; the risk of your being observed is too great."

"Well, if your Royal Highness will only tell me the when, the where, and the how," said the Hangman, "I will be punctual."

"I have it!" exclaimed the prince. "An idea has struck me. Lady Ernestina Dysart is so deeply mixed up in this business that she must help me in it."

"Ah! to be sure," observed Coffin. "Your Royal Highness can send her to meet me somewhere and hand me over the money."

"This day week, at eleven o'clock at night, and on Westminster Bridge," said the prince regent. "Be that the appointment."

"Well and good," rejoined the Hangman. "But to make it more definite, suppose we say that Lady Ernestina, or whoever you may send, will find me seated in the recess

over the middle arch, on the left hand side of the bridge as you cross it."

"It is a bargain," observed the prince. "And now you may leave me."

Daniel Coffin accordingly retired by the private staircase, the prince following him to unfasten the door at the bottom.

We need hardly inform our readers that Sir Douglas Huntingdon was so astounded, so amazed, by all he had just heard, that he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses. If he had occasionally failed to catch a few words here and there, in the preceding colloquy, he had nevertheless heard the greater portion, — enough, indeed, to make the whole tremendous episode in the prince's career perfectly plain to his comprehension. That his Royal Highness should have so deeply committed himself with such a man as Daniel Coffin was more than enough to confound the baronet and stagger his belief. Indeed, as he moved slowly away from the glass door at the conclusion of the scene, he asked himself, "Is this a reality, or is it a vision? Am I awake, or walking in my sleep?"

Quitting the antechamber, threading the long passage, and crossing the landing once more, the baronet wended his way back to Venetia's boudoir, on entering which, he found her alone, reclining on the sofa, and wrapped in profound meditation.

"I have returned," said the baronet, "simply because I may have an alteration to make in our proceedings of to-morrow night. Something has occurred which is suggestive of a change of tactics, placing, indeed, the principal inmates of Leveson House more completely in my power than ever. But I shall not now trouble you with explanations, Venetia. Suffice it for you to know that you shall not only baffle the marquis, but likewise behold him so deeply humiliated that he shall throw himself at your feet in an agony of terror, a grovelling, servile, miserable wretch."

"Oh, if you can accomplish all this," exclaimed Venetia, her countenance, a few moments before so pensive, now lighting up with joy, "you know not how happy you will render me, and how deeply, deeply grateful I shall prove."

"Fear not, dear Venetia," responded the baronet, "that I shall fail in accomplishing all I promise. Indeed," he added, with a look of profound and tender meaning, "the

reward held out is sufficient to excite me to even superhuman exertions in your cause."

"And that reward shall not be withheld," murmured Venetia, bending down her blushing countenance.

The compact was sealed with a fond embrace, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon took his departure.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ROYAL BROTHER AND SISTER

About an hour after the occurrences just related the prince regent received a pressing note from his sister, the Princess Sophia, begging that he would call upon her as soon as possible. Her Royal Highness occupied apartments in St. James's Palace, and thither the prince accordingly repaired.

We have stated in a preceding chapter that the Princess Sophia was now about thirty-eight years of age, of luxuriant embonpoint, and of very handsome countenance. But the traces of deep care were visible upon her features; and without rising from her chair in the elegant apartment where she received her brother, the royal lady bade him, in a languid tone, place himself near her, as she wished to consult him on a matter of the utmost importance.

The ladies who were in attendance upon the princess had withdrawn, in obedience to a sign which she made on the entrance of her brother; and this circumstance, together with the deep melancholy which appeared in Sophia's manner, and the look of mingled mystery and hesitation with which she regarded him, proved that it was indeed some affair of more than usual importance that had induced her thus to send for him.

"Has anything unpleasant occurred?" asked the prince, who was conscious of so many misdeeds of his own and so many errors and frailties on the part of every member of his family that he was always apprehensive of detection, exposure, or retribution.

"Nothing has occurred that need give you any particular annoyance," replied the princess. Then, after a few moments' pause, during which the colour went and came upon

her cheeks even under the artificial bloom which a cosmetic shed thereon, she continued to observe, "The advice which I seek at your hands especially regards my own happiness."

"And yet you seem afraid of speaking outright," remarked the prince, somewhat impatiently.

"Yes," said the Princess Sophia, her eyes filling with tears, "because it is a painful thing for a sister to speak to a brother of her frailty and her shame."

"For Heaven's sake explain yourself!" exclaimed the prince, starting uneasily, and then fixing a penetrating look upon his sister. "Would you have me understand that you have again formed some connection which is likely to threaten you with disgrace and dishonour?"

"No, no!" returned the princess, hastily and almost indignantly. "It is concerning the secret of my early years that I would speak to you, — a secret that has so long been known to you — "

"Yes, the affair in the Edgeware Road," interrupted the prince. "But what danger threatens to transpire therefrom? Lady Florimel surely has not betrayed you?"

"Lady Florimel is the most admirable of women," exclaimed the princess, "and I believe that she would die to serve me. It is not my secret that is menaced, but my happiness that is deeply, deeply compromised, — that is to say, such little happiness as circumstances have permitted me to retain from the wreck of all the generous feelings, fervid affections, and buoyant hopes of youth."

"And so long as your secret is safe," observed the prince, somewhat disgusted with the sentimentalism now exhibited by his sister, "why the devil should you be unhappy?"

"Unhappy!" she echoed, with a bitter laugh. "Should I not be something less or something more than woman, were I really and truly happy? Or think you, George, that I can possibly blind myself to the fact that our family, the royal family of England, is rapidly becoming an object of loathing, hatred, and scorn to the great masses of the community? Is it not said openly, that our unhappy sire has gone mad through remorse at his own crimes and anguish at the misdeeds of his children? Has it not been even more than hinted that our brother Ernest was the murderer of Sellis? And you will excuse me for reminding you, my

dear George, that the press has been recently more busy than ever with your name — "

"A truce to all this recapitulation of evils!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, suddenly. "You are in a melancholy mood, Sophia, your spirits are depressed, and therefore you are giving way to the gloomiest forebodings. Was it to entertain me with your miseries and make me as miserable as yourself that you have sent for me hither?"

"How unkind of you to speak thus!" cried the unhappy princess, bursting into tears, for the conduct of her brother on the present occasion seemed more than usually heartless, especially as she herself was more than ever in need of affectionate sympathy.

"Well, well," said the prince, somewhat softening toward his sister, "tell me what advice you seek at my hands, or what service you require of me."

"Listen to me patiently for a few minutes, and you will then understand wherefore I am thus unhappy," said the princess, wiping the tears from her eyes. "You are aware, dear George," she continued, with looks slightly averted, as if she dared not meet his gaze while touching upon the present topic, "you are aware that upwards of nineteen years have now elapsed since I became a mother. The babe was entrusted to a surgeon of the name of Thurston, the same who has since risen to such eminence and acquired so great a renown as a physician. About two months ago, yielding to an irresistible impulse, I called upon Lady Florimel and besought her to institute inquiries relative to the fate of that son whom from its very birth I had thus abandoned to the care of strangers. My dear friend Pauline at once undertook the commission, and she called upon Doctor Thurston, from whose lips she learned that the child had been stolen in its infancy. Indeed, it was in the month of June, 1795, when the child was between five and six months old, that it was thus stolen from the arms of its nurse in Hyde Park. Doctor Thurston knows that the child was mine, has known it, indeed, for a very long time; but he has kept the secret inviolable. His honesty, his integrity, in this respect at once convinced Pauline that he was telling the truth when he stated that the child had been stolen. Moreover, he showed her a printed hand-bill which was circulated at the time, bearing the date I just now mentioned, and

offering a reward for the recovery of the child. Lady Florimel was, as you may suppose, profoundly grieved for my sake on hearing such terrible intelligence from Doctor Thurston, but she nevertheless deemed it her duty to report the whole truth to me. What my feelings have since been I shall not attempt to describe. Suffice it to say that while picturing the most horrible destinies for the unhappy progeny of my youthful weakness, I have looked upon myself as the most unnatural of mothers. But in the meantime, — since that interview between Lady Florimel and Doctor Thurston, — the head officer of Bow Street has been employed by the physician to discover, if possible, some trace of the lost one."

" Ah! Lawrence Sampson," ejaculated the prince. " He is a clever fellow. But I hope that Thurston did not entrust him with your secret? "

" No," said the princess. " Doctor Thurston represented that it was his own child who had been lost. And this Mr. Sampson has succeeded not only in discovering that the lost one is alive, but also where he is and the manner he has been brought up."

Here the Princess Sophia burst into a flood of tears, and her voice was choked with the convulsive sobs that rent her bosom.

" Where is the boy? " inquired the prince, " and in what sphere of life has he been trained? I am afraid that you have nothing very satisfactory to impart on this point."

" Good heavens! what a dreadful idea is it for a mother to contemplate! " exclaimed the princess, wringing her hands in bitterest anguish; but, suddenly regaining the fortitude of despair, she dashed the tear from her eyes, and turning her looks steadfastly upon her brother, said, in a deep and solemn tone, " My son, the offspring of my early crime, has been trained amongst the vilest of the vile, dragged through all the mire, feculence, and corruption of demoralization, inured to depravity, steeped to the very crown of his head in all moral abominations, and now — O God! that a mother's tongue should have to proclaim so hideous a fact! — and now, I say, he is in the service of a man who occupies the basest, the most loathed, scorned, and abhorred position that is to be found at the bottom of the social scale."

" To whom do you allude? " demanded the prince, who, in spite of his intense selfishness and his cold-blooded in-

difference to the sorrows of others, could not help being somewhat touched by the spectacle of his sister's dread despair, as likewise by the appalling interest that belonged to this narrative which she was reciting. "Who is the man that you thus speak of as being the master or employer of the lad?"

The Princess Sophia turned upon her brother a look full of unutterable misery as she said, in a low and scarcely audible tone, "Who is that man? It is the public executioner."

"What, Daniel Coffin!" ejaculated the prince, the mention of the dreadful man appearing ominous to a degree, inasmuch as but little more than an hour had elapsed since he and his Royal Highness had stood face to face in the splendid saloon at Carlton House. "This fellow now seems destined to spring up frequently in my path," thought the prince within himself, and the feelings of disgust, annoyance, and even alarm which he thus experienced were reflected in his countenance.

"Oh, you may well be horrified and terror-stricken!" exclaimed the princess, not altogether comprehending the spring of her brother's emotions; for she was of course utterly unaware of the fact that the common hangman was personally known to the prince regent of the kingdom.

"But what do you propose to do in the matter?" demanded his Royal Highness, "or what do you wish or expect that I should do for you?"

"Hear me out, and then you will understand wherefore I have sent for you. For nearly two months," continued the princess, "has Doctor Thurston been aware that the unfortunate youth is alive and in the service of that dreadful man, but not until yesterday had the physician the courage to communicate to Lady Florimel the result of Mr. Lawrence Sampson's researches. Indeed, it was only when Pauline threatened to call personally upon the Bow Street officer and ascertain whether anything was being done in the matter, it was only then, I say, that Doctor Thurston admitted that Sampson's efforts had already been crowned, too fatally crowned, with success. And now it would also appear that, by a singular coincidence, Mr. Sampson, before being engaged in that research at all, had fallen in with the youth, had conceived an interest in his behalf, had invited

him to his house, and had done all he could to reclaim him from the ways of vice. But although the endeavour seemed to prosper for a few days, those favourable symptoms speedily disappeared, and alas! the youth returned to his old companions and no doubt to his old habits. All these things did Lady Florimel succeed in gleaning, or rather extorting, from Doctor Thurston's lips yesterday, and this day has she revealed them to me!"

"Then if the youth is so inveterate in his bad habits," observed the prince, "the best thing will be to leave him where he is."

"How can you recommend such a course?" cried the princess, in a voice of bitter remonstrance.

"How could you have abandoned him for more than nineteen years?" demanded the prince, coolly.

"Oh, now I am indeed righteously rewarded for my unnatural conduct!" and as the princess thus spoke in a voice of rending anguish, she again burst into a flood of tears, at the first outpouring of which her brother made a movement of impatience. "Unnatural mother that I have been," she continued, after a long pause, "most richly, richly do I deserve every reproach, every taunt, every imputation, that can be thrown against me. Nevertheless, it is cruel indeed to receive this chastisement at the hands of a brother."

"Well, perhaps I was a little harsh," said the prince regent, "but do pray tell me at once and without any further circumlocution what I can do for you, what you require at my hands?"

"Of all my brothers you only," said the princess, "are acquainted with my secret, and therefore, in the first place, it was natural I should confide to your ears all that I have learned concerning my boy. In the second place, you alone, as prince regent, have the power to snatch that unhappy youth away from the career of degradation and depravity which he is pursuing."

"Sophia!" exclaimed the prince, bending a stern look upon his sister, "am I to understand that you propose to place this youth about your person, to have him near you, and make him aware of the secret of his birth?"

"I mean nothing of all this," returned the princess. "But I wish him to be rescued from that den of infamy where he now is, and to be placed in some honourable

position. I wish him to be removed from that grade of life where he is constantly liable to be either tempted or necessitated to do evil. In a word, I wish that he may have a chance and opportunity given him to retrieve his character and to become an honest member of society."

"But how, in the devil's name," cried the prince, impatiently, "am I to accomplish all this? Would you have me send for him, tell him I have heard of his merits, and at once appoint him to the post of valet in my household? Such an idea is ridiculous. He would be coming to my bedchamber in the middle of the night to cut my throat —"

"Cruel, heartless brother!" shrieked forth the Princess Sophia, "you are speaking of my own son!"

"And a pretty son, it seems by all accounts, you have allowed him to grow up," retorted the prince, brutally. "Come, come, let us have no more whining, crying, and whimpering on this point. What you have permitted the boy to become so he must remain."

"Never!" ejaculated the princess, starting from her seat and flinging glances of fiery indignation upon the prince regent. "No, by Heaven!" she exclaimed, "I will sooner peril discovery and run the risk of disgrace than allow that boy to remain in the vile companionship to which he has been too long abandoned. My conduct as a mother has been execrable to a degree, and I swear that some atonement shall be made now. Assist me if you will, and if not, then, disguised in humble apparel, I will myself visit the abode of infamy and horror where that poor boy now dwells."

"You are mad, Sophia, you are mad!" exclaimed the prince, in mingled anger and alarm. "Such a proceeding on your part would be attended with the most serious risks; indeed, discovery would be almost inevitable, and if you are once in the power of such a desperate villain as the public executioner," he added, bitterly, "God help you!"

"Then, George, dear George," said the princess, the excitement of anger suddenly experiencing a complete reaction as she saw the truth of her brother's reasoning, although she little conjectured how feelingly he spoke relative to the Hangman, "pray assist me to save this boy from utter, utter ruin. Succour me to rescue him ere it be too late. Conceive, only fancy the horror, the ineffable, illimitable horror, that would seize upon my soul were he to be drawn

into some crime that would send him to the scaffold. Oh, if my feelings now prompt me to extend a helping hand toward him, what would they do in such a case as that? Should I not be goaded by desperation to dare everything, — exposure, dishonour, ridicule, scorn? George, my dear brother," she exclaimed, throwing herself at his feet and clasping her hands wildly, " listen, I beseech thee, to the prayer of a penitent woman, an agonizing mother, and assist me to save my son."

" Rise, Sophia, rise," said the prince, somewhat moved again by the spectacle of his sister's highly wrought anguish. " I will see what can be done in the matter. If the habeas corpus was suspended just at this moment, I would soon manage the thing by having him seized, locked up, and subjected to some reformatory process. As it is, I may have him kidnapped and put on board a ship bound for the colonies, taking care to provide for him a good situation on his landing in Canada, Jamaica, or New South Wales, just as the case may be."

" You will consider the matter, you will reflect upon it well? " said the princess. " But promise me two things."

" Name them," observed his Royal Highness, " and then I will give you my answer."

" In the first place," rejoined Sophia, " promise me that no step shall be taken in the matter without my knowledge and concurrence; and, in the second place, you must pledge yourself that before the boy quits England for ever you will, by some means of other, procure me an opportunity of seeing him for a moment, at some place and under such circumstances as to preclude the possibility of my being recognized by any one."

" And if I do all this for you," said the prince, after a long pause, during which he remained buried in a deep reverie, " if I do all this for you, I say, will you undertake to do a certain service for me? "

" Oh, yes," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, well pleased at beholding the affair assume the appearance of a bargain, because she knew enough of her brother's selfish disposition to be aware that he was much more likely to do her a favour when he required one in return than he would be if the obligation were all on one side. " Tell me what service you require at my hands, tell me what I can do for you."

"By one of the inscrutable impulses of nature," said the prince, his look suddenly assuming more of what may be termed a religious seriousness than for years past it had ever been accustomed to put on, "your maternal feelings, Sophia, have been touched, and evidently to some depth. Whether it be curiosity to behold one's offspring, whether it be some intuitive prompting of latent love, or whether it be one of those impulses which have their origin in a moment of the heart's weakness, I cannot say; but not the less certain is it that I have more than once experienced, within the last year or two, a similar feeling to that which has this day manifested itself in you."

"What mean you, my dear brother?" inquired the princess.

"I will soon explain myself," he continued. "In the same way that you experienced a desire to behold your son, even if it be only for a single moment, so am I influenced by an earnest longing to cast my eyes, if only for a moment likewise, upon my daughter. You know full well that Florence Eaton, the niece of Lord and Lady Florimel, is my own child, the daughter of that Octavia, Pauline's sister, whom I loved with so profound an adoration."

"But Florence knows not that you are her father," observed the princess, gently.

"No, nor is it necessary that she should, not a whit more necessary than that your son should be made aware that you are his mother. You are intimate with the Florimels," continued the regent, "and you can so manage matters that some day, for a few moments, my daughter may appear in my presence and speak to me, although without being aware that she is my daughter."

"Do you not know, George, that your name is seldom, very seldom mentioned in the presence of Pauline? for her husband and her friends are ever fearful of reviving the memory of her dead sister."

"Yes, and also because the Florimels regard me as the destroyer of poor Octavia's health, happiness, and life," added the prince, in a mournful tone; and for an instant he seemed as if remorse had touched his heart, for an expression of unutterable anguish suddenly swept over his countenance. "But it will not be necessary for me and the Florimels to meet," he added, immediately. "Do you arrange matters

in such a way that I may see my daughter for a few moments, that I may hear her voice, that I may compare her with the image of her mother, who is gone, and that, in a word, I may have the satisfaction of beholding my child, although I may not announce myself as her father, but must coldly retain my character as her prince and the representative of her sovereign. Do this for me, Sophia, pledge yourself to gratify me in that respect, and I will perform for you all that you have asked in reference to your son."

"It is a compact between us," said the princess. "To-morrow I will see Pauline upon this subject."

"And I, on my part," rejoined the prince, "will lose no time in deliberating on the best way to accomplish all you desire in respect to your son."

The brother and sister then separated, the former returning to Carlton House, and the latter remaining in her own apartment at St. James's Palace, to ponder upon the many, many things which sat heavy upon her mind.

CHAPTER XV

THE BARONET AND THE HANGMAN

On the following day, between two and three o'clock in the afternoon, Mr. Daniel Coffin was sitting on the step of his shop door, smoking a long pipe, and conversing with a neighbour who was doing precisely the same on the opposite side of Fleet Lane. Jack the Foundling was in his own room, reading the history of Dick Turpin; Sally Melmoth was attending to her household duties; and Dick had gone out to pass an hour or two at some skittle-ground. Mr. Coffin was therefore " minding the shop," although he had very few customers at that time of the day, and would much rather have been without them altogether, the shop being, as we have before informed our readers, a mere " blind " to serve as an ostensible source of income in addition to his official gains and perquisites as hangman.

What the conversation was about which he was carrying on with his neighbour we do not propose to describe; suffice it to say that it was all of a sudden cut short by an ejaculation of mingled astonishment and alarm on the part of Daniel Coffin, as he beheld Sir Douglas Huntingdon ascending the lane.

The reader will not fail to comprehend how it was that the Hangman's equanimity was disturbed for a moment on beholding the baronet; for there was not only the adventure at Shooter's Hill in which Mr. Coffin was implicated, but there was likewise the grave episode of the fire, and far more serious still, there was the murder of Nell Gibson. But the Hangman possessed, as we have frequently shown, a wondrous amount of presence of mind; and no sooner were his apprehensions conceived than by a rapid chain of reasoning he set them at rest once more.

" If the baronet had meant to be nasty about the Shooter's Hill affair, he would have done something at once and not let a dozen days elapse like this. The same may be said about the fire at his house; and moreover any lawyer would tell him that he could not prove it was me and my pals that did it. Then as for the groom, no one can say but what he was burnt alive, for who would think he had been knocked on the head first? Lastly, it's out of all question for anybody to suspect that Nell Gibson has been made away with, except those who did it. So the baronet can't be coming with the intention of doing me any harm, that's positive."

Such were the thoughts which swept through the brain of Daniel Coffin, although at the same time he would much rather that Sir Douglas Huntingdon had not made his appearance in Fleet Lane at all, for when a person's conscience is not very pure, a shadow will sometimes disturb it.

" Well, Mr. Coffin," said the baronet, pausing in front of the shop with a good-tempered look, " I have come to pay you a visit, you see."

" So I see indeed," returned the Hangman, with a grim smile, " but I hope there's no ill feeling between us on account of what took place down yonder some little time back."

" Ah! you mean the affair at the Jolly Wagoner's and then at Shooter's Hill? " said the baronet, who, be it understood, did not know who were the authors of the conflagration of his house. " Well, I no doubt ought to owe you a little grudge for that proceeding on your part, but as I came out of it safe and sound, I will say nothing more on the subject. The truth is, I wish to speak to you on another little matter."

" Walk in, sir," exclaimed the Hangman, not only well pleased at finding that he was really free from danger, but also suspecting that the individual who had once stood the chance of being made a victim was now come as a patron or employer. " Walk in, sir, and if you don't like to talk in the shop, you can step into my parlour, where," he added, with another grim smile, " you shall be sure of good treatment."

" Oh, we can talk very well in the shop," returned the baronet, glancing around, " since there is no one here but ourselves, and I presume we are secure against eavesdroppers? "

" Perfectly so," rejoined the Hangman. " And now, won't you sit down, sir, and make yourself quite at home? "

The baronet accordingly took a chair, while Daniel Coffin lounged against the mantelpiece anxiously awaiting the explanation of his visitor's business.

" I have reason to know," resumed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, fixing his eyes upon the executioner, " that you are not altogether unacquainted with the interior of Leveson House — "

" Ah! how the deuce did you discover that? " exclaimed Coffin.

" Never mind how I came to know it," said the baronet. " It is sufficient for our present purpose that I am acquainted with the fact, and what is more, I have reason to believe that you are not altogether a stranger to those secret apartments in Leveson House, one of which contains the curiously contrived armchairs."

" By goles! " cried the Hangman, " you seem to know all about it; and if you was ever caught in one of those chairs, you can perhaps judge how pleasant such captivity must be. But pray go on, sir, with what you was saying."

" I wish to know," proceeded Sir Douglas, " whether you could undertake to introduce yourself at a particular hour into Leveson House, and there lie concealed behind the curtains in one of the secret apartments until such time as some signal, to be previously agreed upon, should summon you forth? "

" There isn't a house in London that I can't introduce myself into somehow or another, and there isn't a door that I can't open by hook or by crook. But how am I to know," demanded the Hangman, " that all this mayn't be some plant on your part to get me into a scrape and revenge yourself for that little business down at Shooter's Hill? "

" The answer is easy, both to be given and to be understood," replied Sir Douglas. " If I really had the intention of punishing you, I should not condescend to devise a trap to ensnare you, nor should I beat about the bush in a manner alike unnecessary and ridiculous; but I should at once give you into custody, and allow the law to become my avenger. But for the sake of that young woman Ellen Gibson — "

" Ah! she is a nice young woman, too, notwithstanding all her faults," observed the Hangman, with a diabolical

hypocrisy. "We have quite forgiven her for having put you up to the dodge at the hut, because she handed us over the hundred guineas you sent us through her, and so all was right. Well, I am satisfied now on second thoughts that you don't mean any treachery in getting me to Leveson House; besides which, I always have at least a couple of barkers, and may be a dagger, with sometimes a bottle of vitriol, in my pocket, so that in any case," added Coffin, with a grin of diabolical ferocity, "I should be rather a troublesome customer to grapple with. I think you would sooner catch a lion or a boa-constrictor without injury to yourself than take me alive. A bullet in the brain, a dagger planted in the heart, or a bottle of vitriol smashed on the head — "

"Well, well," interrupted the baronet, "you need not recapitulate all your modes of defence, because no injury is intended you. The plain facts are these: the Marquis of Leveson is manœuvring to get a certain lady into his power, and I wish to take this lady's part and compel his lordship to renounce all further pretensions or claims, if indeed he have any, in that respect. This can only be done by proving that enough is known concerning his niece, Lady Ernestina, to involve her in serious trouble. You are the man whose presence at Leveson House on the occasion will strike terror and dismay into the hearts of the guilty ones, and bring matters to an issue that will serve my purpose. Now, do you consent to enact this part in the proposed drama? If so, name your price and it shall be paid, half in ready cash as an earnest of good faith, and the other half when we meet at Leveson House."

The Hangman reflected in silence for a few minutes. According to his arrangement with the prince regent on the preceding day, it was most probable that Lady Ernestina Dysart would be the messenger whom his Royal Highness would send to keep the appointment on Westminster Bridge a week thence, and pay over the five hundred guineas. Would it be prudent, then, for the Hangman to adopt a hostile course toward Lady Ernestina, and embark in any enterprise inimical to herself? This was the point which Coffin revolved in his mind. But then, on the other hand, here was Sir Douglas Huntingdon, no doubt ready to pay a handsome fee for the service he required, and Coffin was too avaricious and too greedy of gold not to snap at the present

bait. Suddenly it struck him that by entering into a scheme thus hostile to Ernestina, it would positively and actually have the effect of rendering her all the more anxious to get him out of the country; and as he had told the prince that he wanted the five hundred guineas for the purpose of emigrating, her ladyship, on learning that such was the case, would be all the more eager to supply him with the funds for his alleged departure. Besides, suppose that Ernestina should refuse to become the prince's messenger on the night appointed for the payment of the money on Westminster Bridge, would not his Royal Highness entrust the matter to some other person? Most assuredly; for Daniel Coffin felt that the prince would do anything rather than stand the chance of being troubled with further visits from such a person as himself. All things thus considered, the Hangman resolved to accept Sir Douglas Huntingdon's proposal.

"Well, sir," he said, "I have just been thinking over the matter, and I don't see why I shouldn't earn a couple of hundred guineas in this way as well as another."

"From which remark," observed the baronet, "I understand that you require two hundred guineas as your recompense?"

"Well, sir, I don't think I can do it for less. You see I shall have to get into Leveson House stealthily, as one may say, or at all events, however I may manage to get in, I shall have to creep about on the sly, and so stand the chance of being shot as a burglar."

"I do not object to the amount of the reward you ask," interrupted the baronet. "On the contrary, here are bank-notes and gold for a hundred guineas." Then, having counted down the money, at the sight of which the Hangman's eyes twinkled with the sinister vibrations that are seen in those of a snake, Sir Douglas Huntingdon said, "It is for to-night that your services are required. By eleven o'clock must you be concealed behind the draperies in one of the rooms belonging to the private suite, and when you hear me say that the public executioner himself can bear testimony to the infamies of those chambers, you must come forth from your hiding-place."

"Then you will be there to-night also?" said the Hangman, inquiringly.

"I shall," returned the baronet. "And now I think we understand each other fully?"

"We do so," rejoined the Hangman.

The baronet then took his leave, and Daniel Coffin hastened to secure the hundred guineas in some secret place where he was wont to deposit his ill-gotten gains. Then for the rest of the afternoon and evening he amused himself with smoking, drinking, and pondering upon the best means of obtaining ingress to Leveson House.

It was about half-past nine o'clock at night when he secured his pistols, dagger, skeleton-keys, dark lantern, and other burglarious apparatus about his person, and enveloping himself in a capacious cloak, set off for the West End. It was half-past ten when he reached Albemarle Street, and he walked two or three times up and down in front of Leveson House, in order to ascertain in how many rooms lights were burning, and whether there were many people going out and in, so that he might form an idea whether the house was tolerably quiet or not. The result of his observation was that the mansion was remarkably tranquil; and on the front door being opened to take in a letter, the Hangman's eyes, plunging into the hall, observed no one loitering there except the porter himself. Accordingly, a minute or two after the messenger had delivered the letter, the Hangman stepped boldly up to the front door and gave a sort of uncertain double knock, like the timid and hesitating summons of a poor tradesman.

The hall-porter immediately opened the door, whereupon Daniel Coffin, with the coolest impudence imaginable, bestowed a familiar nod upon the official, as if to imply "that it was all right," and walked in without a word. The hall-porter remembered to have seen that ill-looking face before, for indeed, if once viewed, it could not very well be forgotten. He had seen Coffin, be it remembered, on the night that he called to obtain an interview with Lady Ernestina Dysart, and also on the morning when he went thither relative to Ariadne. Besides, as the porter was well aware that some queer characters occasionally visited Leveson House for the purpose of ministering to the intrigues of the marquis in respect to the fair sex, he was by no means astonished at seeing such an ill-looking fellow as Coffin make his appearance there. Moreover, remembering his

face, and observing the air of assurance with which he so coolly entered, the porter naturally supposed that he had come in pursuance of some appointment; and therefore he said not a word, but let him pass on.

This was precisely what Daniel Coffin had calculated upon; and traversing the hall, he ascended the stairs with all the self-sufficiency of a visitor who knew that he was expected. Fortune favoured his enterprise, for he did not encounter a soul as he proceeded up the marble staircase, traversed the landing, and sought the Crimson Drawing-room. But had he met any of the dependents, he was prepared with some kind of subterfuge to explain his presence in the mansion.

Coffin had previously ascertained, from the observation he had made in the street, that there were no lights in the Crimson Drawing-room, — the situation of which apartment in the house he had experienced no trouble in recollecting, for the memory of the accomplished burglar is rendered keenly acute to all such details as these. The Hangman accordingly entered that drawing-room without the slightest hesitation, and he found it unoccupied and dark, as he had expected. By aid of the skeleton keys, he at once entered the mysterious suite of apartments, which he had explored on the first occasion of his visit to Leveson House.

Here we must leave Mr. Daniel Coffin for a short time, and transfer the attention of the reader to another apartment in the same spacious and splendid mansion. The chamber to which we now introduce ourselves is that of Lady Ernestina Dysart, and the beauteous but depraved occupant thereof has just retired thither, it being now nearly eleven o'clock.

But Lady Ernestina felt no inclination to seek her couch. Her naturally fervid temperament and strong passions had recently produced in her a certain restlessness and uneasiness, for which she herself could scarcely account. The consummate hypocrisy of her situation, not only compelling her to wear widow's weeds, but also to maintain the seclusion of a widow, served as it were as a retribution and a punishment. She had no opportunity of gratifying those longings which inspired her, nor of appeasing those passions which devoured her. Were she able to go out into society, how soon might she form a connection of a tender nature; but cooped up as she was by the necessity of affecting to mourn

for the death of that very husband whom she herself had been the means of sending to the scaffold, she was entombed in a seclusion that every day grew more and more intolerable. Her imagination was most prurient and licentious, her disposition both fervid and depraved, and thus her passions, while unappeased, were like serpents gnawing at her vitals.

Hence was it that Lady Ernestina Dysart, on the present occasion, experienced no inclination to retire to rest. She knew that her uncle the marquis had some intrigue on hand; but what it was, or who its object might be, she was unaware. Nevertheless, the mere thought that an intrigue of such a nature was in progress beneath that roof was sufficient to give such an impulse to her thoughts as to set her very imagination in a flame. In this morbid state of mind was it that she began to experience an irresistible longing to inspect once more the sculptured and pictorial representations of love and pleasure with which her uncle's private gallery was filled.

Taking up a candle, Ernestina stealthily quitted her room and repaired to that bedchamber whence there was a private door into the apartment containing the mechanical chairs. That this bedchamber would no more be used by the Marquis of Leveson she well knew; inasmuch as the terrible episode connected with Ariadne Varian had left such an impression upon his lordship's mind as to induce him to order that chamber to be shut up at least for the present. Ernestina therefore felt confident that she ran no risk of discovery by proceeding that way, and, locking the outer door after her, she traversed the chamber where poor Ariadne had passed through all the phases of her appalling trance.

Opening the door of the dressing-room by means of the secret spring, Ernestina proceeded into the room adjoining, and thence she passed into the gallery containing the sculptures and the pictures.

Carrying the wax candle in her hand, she proceeded to examine the various groups of statuary and the splendid specimens of the limner's art; but the farther she advanced down the gallery, the more consuming became the passions that were excited in her bosom. Beneath the sable weeds of mourning raged the frenetic desires of a Bacchanal. The virgin white collar which covered her breast rose and sank with the sensuous palpitations of the heaving globes

beneath. Above her flushing countenance sat the widow's cap, of as snowy a purity as the collar upon her bosom; but instead of setting off to advantage a face where Christian resignation was blended with a soft melancholy, its vivid whiteness threw out in stronger contrast the cheeks that were thus crimsoned with the mantling glow of consuming desire. The heart of that woman was a volcano at this moment, as she gloated upon all the refinements of sensuality that were scattered around.

Presently she paused before a mirror stretching from the floor to the ceiling, and reflecting every object in the gallery upon its polished surface. Heavy crimson draperies hung on each side of this mirror, and festooned along the top, so that no gilded framework was visible, and the effect thus produced was that of the prolongation of the gallery to a considerable length. Ernestina caught a glimpse of herself in this resplendent mirror, and was about to turn away when she was struck with the deep crimson of her countenance, and feeling the fires that were burning in her bosom, she stood to observe their effect upon her features.

"The face," she thought within herself, "is too faithful a reflex of the human heart. Were any one to see me now, it would be impossible to prevent all my secret thoughts from being probed to the very bottom. Ah! the countenance is indeed a tablet — "

But at this moment Ernestina gave a sudden start as if a viper had bitten her, and the colour fled from her cheeks as rapidly as darkness supervenes in a room at night when the candle is suddenly extinguished.

For, as she stood gazing upon the mirror, she was struck with the sudden apparition of a figure stealing in from the door at the other extremity of the room, and a mortal terror at once seized upon the miserable woman, as she recognized the too well-known form and features of the public executioner.

CHAPTER XVI

TERROR

It was a wonder that Lady Ernestina did not drop the candle from her hand, but perhaps it was the convulsing horror that seized upon her entire frame that made her fingers grasp it with a spasmodic rigidity.

Scarcely had she caught that glimpse of the Hangman, when he glided suddenly behind a curtain close by the door; and when he had thus disappeared from her view, Ernestina breathed more freely again. Terror loosened the iron grasp which it had fastened upon her, and she experienced a sudden relief on observing that the dreadful man was not coming to accost her then and there.

Calling all her presence of mind to her aid, she turned slowly and in a leisurely manner from the mirror, and took a seat in one of the superb chairs which were placed at intervals along the gallery. These chairs, be it understood, were not provided with any treacherous mechanism, and Ernestina thus sat down, not so much to collect her thoughts as because the sudden terror she had just experienced made her limbs feel heavy, and had stricken her as it were with the numbness of sore fatigue.

Placing the candle upon the pedestal of a statue, she leaned her head upon her beautiful white hand, wondering within herself what on earth the Hangman could possibly be doing within the walls of Leveson House again. That he had come not to seek her was pretty evident, inasmuch as he had just concealed himself behind a curtain, doubtless imagining that his presence and proceeding were not perceived in the mirror. Then, what was he doing there? Had he come to rob the house? Or was he in any way engaged in the intrigue which her uncle had in hand for that night?

This was the most reasonable supposition that presented itself to Ernestina's mind, and she felt convinced it must be a correct one. For she had heard from the marquis that it was Daniel Coffin who had brought Ariadne Varian to Leveson House, and therefore it did not appear extraordinary that he should be again employed in the nobleman's service.

Having come to the conclusion that she had thus solved the mystery of Daniel Coffin's presence there on the present occasion, Lady Ernestina became deeply anxious to quit the gallery and return to her own room. She felt as if she were in the vicinage of some fearful though hidden danger. It was the feeling which may be supposed to inspire the Hindu traveller when passing beneath the overhanging branches of a wood where boa-constrictors are known to lie in ambush, ready to dart down upon their prey. Indeed, nothing could equal — and assuredly nothing could transcend — the horror which Ernestina entertained for that terrible individual, — not so much because she knew him to be the most consummate of scoundrels, nor because he was the public executioner, whose very hands might almost be supposed to feel clammy with the touch of the strangled dead, but because he had dug the grave in which her paramour was interred at the Blackheath villa.

Conquering her emotions as well as she was able, and assuming as calm and placid a demeanour as she could possibly put on, Ernestina rose from the chair, took the candle, and moved toward the door. But she felt herself shuddering, she felt herself quailing, she felt, too, that it was almost impossible to look unconcerned, or to seem as if she fancied herself alone in that place; for her very sensations told her that from behind the curtain near the door, the sinister looks of the public executioner were fixed upon her. Recurring to the illustration of the Hindu traveller, we may observe that the effect was with Lady Ernestina the same as if she had to pass a place whence a snake would fling forth its hideous length and wind itself with rapid whirling coils around her, and as if she already beheld the eyes of the reptile gleaming forth at her from its ambush. Thus, with increasing trepidation, — with a nervousness rapidly amounting to an excruciation, — did she advance toward the door. She was apparently looking straight forward, and yet with a sort of sidelong gaze was she watching that

curtain behind which the Hangman was concealed, as if every moment she expected it to be flung aside and display the terrible intruder.

But Ernestina's appalling fears were not realized; the curtain remained closed, and all was still, all was tranquil behind it. She reached the door, which stood open; she passed into the next room, and then she threw a shuddering look over her shoulder, to see if the Hangman were not behind her. But no one was there, and, regaining courage, she pressed the secret spring to open the admirably contrived door in the wainscot. Passing out of her uncle's mysterious, or, rather, infamous suite of apartments, she traversed the dressing-room and the bedchamber and emerged upon the landing, where the rapid glance which she flung around at once reassured her that no one was nigh. Breathing now with comparative freedom, she ascended to her own chamber, and locking the door, she flung herself into an armchair, exhausted with the overwhelming effects of the few minutes of stupendous terror through which she had just passed.

And now the thought struck her that if the Marquis of Leveson had not really engaged the services of Daniel Coffin for some intrigue or another, it was absolutely necessary he should be informed of the presence of that individual within the walls of the mansion. But then, what excuse could she allege for having been in that gallery? Depraved as she was, depraved as her uncle was, and depraved as they knew each other thus to be, Ernestina nevertheless shrank from the idea of looking the marquis in the face and confessing that her heated imagination had alone impelled her to visit his museum of artistic devilries and exquisite abominations. She therefore resolved to allow matters to take their chance, though she herself would not be able to seek her couch that night with the knowledge that Daniel Coffin was concealed about the premises.

While these thoughts were still agitating in her mind, she was startled by a sudden knocking at her chamber door, and hastening to open it, she perceived that it was her lady's-maid.

"Ah! my lady," exclaimed the girl, "I am glad that your ladyship has not yet retired to rest."

"Why? What has happened? Is anything the matter?"

demanded Ernestina, all sorts of terrible things connected with the Hangman springing up in her imagination.

" Oh, nothing that I know of, my lady," replied her maid, " but his lordship's valet has just told me to run up and inform your ladyship that the marquis would be glad to see you immediately if you were not yet undressed."

" Where is his lordship? " asked Ernestina, wonder now somewhat taking the place of terror.

" In the Gilded Saloon, my lady," was the response, " and I believe that there is company with his lordship."

" Who can they be, and what can this mean? " said Lady Dysart, in a low, musing tone, as she hastily surveyed herself in a looking-glass to make sure that her toilet was in becoming order ere she obeyed the summons from the Marquis of Leveson.

But we must here digress for a little space in order to make our readers understand how it was that Ernestina's presence was thus peremptorily required at nearly half-past eleven o'clock at night in the Gilded Saloon.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WITNESS

On this same evening Miss Bathurst gave an entertainment at her house in Stratton Street, and amongst the guests were Lord and Lady Sackville, the former, as the reader will remember, being the nephew of the hostess.

Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot were staying with Miss Bathurst, and consequently they were of the party. Lady Curzon was also present, and if Venetia had not been there, the diadem of beauty's queen might have been placed upon the brow of Editha. But every star of fashion, every luminary of the aristocratic world of female charms, was eclipsed by the brilliant Venetia; and while she enjoyed the universal homage of the male sex, she was at once the object of envy and adoration on the part of the ladies. In the former instance her beauty was the principal talisman of her more than imperial sway; in the latter, the secret of her power was the fact that she was the royal favourite.

But while Venetia, immediately after her arrival at Miss Bathurst's, became the radiant centre of an adoring group, her husband had engaged the Countess of Curzon for the first dance. Until this evening, Horace and Editha were not particularly well known to each other. They had often met in the reunions of fashion, it was true, but when the young man was plain Mr. Sackville he had attracted no special notice on Editha's part. Now, however, that he was Lord Sackville, the case was mighty different, and as he accosted her on the present occasion, she greeted him with her sweetest smile. He sat down by her side, and as he gazed furtively upon her, it struck him that she was assuredly a most beautiful creature; while, on her part, Editha wondered that she should never have before noticed how exceedingly handsome

"THEY WENT INTO THE MUSIC ROOM"
Photogravure from original by Bird.

"THEY WENT INTO THE MUSIC ROOM"
Photogravure from original by Bird.

in person and elegant in manners was Lord Sackville. Being thus mutually pleased, they soon fell into a very agreeable and interesting strain of conversation until the quadrille began. Then they danced together, and when the quadrille was over, they went into the music-room, and Editha, being a proficient with the guitar, at that period a fashionable instrument, consented to practise a duet with Lord Sackville. Now, as there were very few persons in that apartment at the time, the greater portion of the guests being in the quadrille-room, Lord Sackville and Lady Curzon were enabled to amuse themselves without much constraint, and what with a little singing and more tender looks, varied by some agreeable discourse, they soon came to be very much pleased with each other.

Venetia, while lounging through the rooms upon the arm of some adoring duke, caught sight of her husband bending over Editha with tender looks, and for an instant the flush of jealousy mantled upon her cheeks, — but only for an instant. No sooner was the jealous sentiment conceived, when it was followed by the thought that she had no right to entertain it. Not only was there a compact between her husband and herself that they were both to pursue their own pleasures independent of the moral restraint of the connubial vows, but she had already availed herself of that immunity in admitting the Earl of Curzon to her arms. Banishing the jealous sentiment, therefore, she bestowed upon Editha a most affable salutation, and on her husband a look of cordial familiarity, as she passed them by; and bidding her ducal companion conduct her back to the quadrille-rooms, she left her husband and Editha to continue their *tête-à-tête* without constraint.

But at about a quarter to eleven Venetia stole away from the gay scene and the brilliant throng, and retiring into Miss Bathurst's own bedchamber, she put on a bonnet provided with a thick veil, and threw a capacious mantle over her elegant ball-dress. Then, hastily descending the stairs, she proceeded on foot to Albemarle Street, which, be it remembered, is only two minutes' walk from Stratton Street, and as the night was fine and dry, she accomplished that trifling distance without any inconvenience.

But let us now return to the interior of Leveson House, thus preceding Lady Sackville's visit thither, and we shall

see what preparations the amorous marquis has made for her reception.

Remembering that on the previous occasion of Venetia's visit to his mansion she had been shown to the Crimson Drawing-room, whence she had penetrated into the adjoining suite of chambers, Lord Leveson now deemed it fitting to receive her in another apartment. Accordingly, he had ordered the most sumptuous room in his mansion, and which bore the title of the Gilded Saloon, to be prepared for the occasion. And well did that apartment deserve its title, for nothing could be more sumptuous, nothing more superb. The ceiling was painted to represent the most curious mosaic work inlaid with gold; the cornices were massive, elaborately carved, and covered with gilding; the walls were painted a rich blue that served as a ground for a tracery of arabesques executed in gilding. The draperies were of purple velvet, with massive golden fringes sweeping the thick carpet, which was of a pattern to match the walls and curtains. The chandeliers were suspended to the ceiling by gilt chains, and every article of furniture consisted of rosewood inlaid with gilding. The mantels — for there were two fireplaces in this spacious room — were covered with the richest ormolu ornaments, and thus when the wax tapers were lighted the effect produced by the whole scene was grand, gorgeous, and magnificent to a degree.

It was in this sumptuous apartment that the Marquis of Leveson anxiously awaited the coming of Venetia at about ten minutes to eleven. The reader has already seen enough of his character to comprehend what his feelings must have been and how his passions were excited at the prospect of the delicious victory which now at length appeared to be within his reach. For he thought to himself that the most splendid woman England ever produced — a woman of such incomparable loveliness that not even the most fastidious critic could find aught to cavil at in feature, contour, or mien — was coming to abandon herself to his arms. He felt that all the joys and pleasure of his long life, if taken together and made to distil in their aggregate all the essence of bliss, were still dull and insipid when compared with the transcending happiness, the ineffable concentration of Elysian delights, which now appeared to be in store for his enjoyment.

The timepieces on the two mantels chimed eleven, and

while the silvery sounds were still vibrating in the perfumed air of the Gilded Saloon, the door was thrown open by the discreet Brockman, and a lady, enveloped in a cloak and with a black veil folded two or three times over her countenance, was ushered into the presence of the marquis. The door instantaneously closed behind her, and raising her veil, she revealed the splendid countenance of Lady Sackville.

"You are come, my dear Venetia, you are come!" said the marquis, flinging himself upon his knees before her. "And now do I apologize, most sincerely, most earnestly, — indeed, most humbly apologize, — for any harsh or insulting words to which I may have given utterance yesterday. I spoke of revenge, but Heaven knows I am incapable of experiencing a vindictive feeling now. Nothing but love shall engage my thoughts; nothing but adoration and worship can entrance my soul in your presence. Oh, if it were possible that you could so far forgive me on account of the past as to gaze upon me, not with a look expressive of the deep consciousness of a sacrifice, but with smiles indicative of unalloyed tenderness, — oh, do this, Venetia, regard me thus kindly, tell me that you no longer cherish animosity toward me, and what is there that I am not prepared to do for thee? My fortune, my wealth, everything, shall be laid at your feet, be placed at your disposal; and while none need suspect our amour, you can still remain the royal favourite, and yet render the Marquis of Leveson, who now kneels at your feet, supremely happy."

When first Lady Sackville had raised the dark veil, her countenance became somewhat serious, although by no means expressive of any very strong emotion, because she had nothing to fear or to inspire her with loathing and disgust at the part which she was acting, inasmuch as she felt assured of being rescued from the necessity of making the crowning sacrifice. When she beheld the marquis throw himself on his knees, she could not help experiencing a sensation of pride and triumph at the consciousness of that power of beauty which thus humbled princes and nobles at her feet; and then, as Leveson contrived to pour forth his rhapsody of mingled adulation, apology, entreaty, and dazzling proposal, the light of satisfaction grew more radiant upon her features, for she saw how his hopes were elevated,

and she joyed in the prospect of that revenge which would speedily convert them into the bitterest disappointment.

"My lord," she said, gently withdrawing the hand which he had snatched while uttering the last few words of his impassioned address, "I beseech you to rise from this suppliant posture. It ill becomes a great and powerful nobleman such as you to kneel at the feet of an unpretending woman such as I."

"Oh, angelic creature!" exclaimed the enraptured marquis, his head too much lost in dreams of bliss to allow him to notice the slight accent of sarcasm with which Venetia had spoken, "you speak of yourself with a humility that is too disparaging, for the whole world of taste, fashion, and aristocracy recognizes in you the peerless queen of beauty."

"And doubtless these united worlds of which your lordship speaks," said Venetia, with an irony charmingly veiled beneath a smile, "have deputed you to become the mouthpiece of their flatteries."

"Flatteries!" cried the marquis, starting to his feet, "they are truths, irrefragable, patent, delicious truths. But do you not intend to lay aside this cloak which envelops a form combining the graces of Venus with the luxuriance of Flora, the majesty of Juno, and the imposing splendour of Diana?"

"Ah! my lord," interrupted Venetia, with a merry laugh, "you would personify in me all the attributes of the heathen divinities."

"Every idea of beauty which I can possibly conceive," said the marquis, gazing upon Venetia with the devouring eyes of passion, "must be called into request to depict your loveliness. But let me remove that invidious bonnet with its great thick veil, let me loosen the strings of this shrouding mantle — "

"Hush! some one approaches!" ejaculated Venetia, and she drew the veil over her countenance.

At the same moment a knock at the door of the saloon was heard, and the marquis hastened to see who was there, muttering to himself, "Perdition! what can this interruption mean? I ordered that on no account was I to be disturbed." Then, on opening the door and beholding his valet, Brockman, he demanded, in an impetuous tone, "What do you want?"

" This gentleman insists upon seeing your lordship. He would take no excuse, and indeed he has even thought fit to follow me hither," and as Brockman thus spoke, he looked around toward some one behind.

" Ah! " ejaculated the marquis, an expression of bitter annoyance and deep misgiving suddenly appearing upon his countenance, as he beheld Sir Douglas Huntingdon advancing along the passage leading from the principal landing to the portal of the Gilded Saloon.

" My dear marquis," said the baronet, in a friendly, or, indeed, with the familiar manner of former times, " I wished most particularly to speak to you, and knowing that I am at all times welcome, I persisted in making Brockman introduce me hither. He is a very excellent servant, I know, and therefore I forgive him the little impertinence implied in the supercilious manner with which he spoke of me as this gentleman, — just for all the world as if he did not know me as well as his own master."

" But, my dear Huntingdon," said Lord Leveson, in a tone of remonstrance, " I am engaged, delicately engaged, at this moment."

" Not too delicately to receive an old friend like me," returned the baronet, and, without more ado, he walked straight into the Gilded Saloon.

The marquis, who saw some evil intent lurking beneath the affected good-humour of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, made a sign for the valet to withdraw, and closing the door again, he turned with deep anxiety toward Venetia, to ascertain by her proceedings whether this intrusion was a prearranged scheme between the intruder and herself.

" My lord," said the baronet, now suddenly throwing off the mask of familiarity which he had worn in the presence of the valet for the purpose of preventing that menial from suspecting that anything extraordinary was in progress, " my lord," he said, adopting a stern and imperious tone, " you will have the kindness to request the attendance of your niece, Lady Ernestina Dysart."

" My niece! — and wherefore? " exclaimed the marquis, as much in amazement as in anger.

" Because I wish to say a few words in her ladyship's presence," rejoined the baronet, with the tone and look of

a man who meant to enforce his designs and had the power to do so.

"But wherefore my niece?" cried the marquis, now trembling with the apprehension of something wrong. "Would you expose me in her presence?"

"My lord, I have no doubt," answered the baronet, with a peculiar smile, "that her ladyship is tolerably well aware of all your lordship's proceedings. Was she not your accomplice in inveigling Miss Louisa Stanley —"

"Ah! the mention of that name," exclaimed the marquis, with an expression of fiendish malignity, "reminds me that if there is to be exposure on one side, there shall be exposure on the other, and that if you mean to proclaim any secret matters connected with the name of Leveson, I shall hold myself justified in making public all I know in connection with the name of Stanley."

"You will tell a different story presently," said the baronet, with a look which made the marquis quail, for he felt how deeply he was already in Huntingdon's power on account of the affair of Ariadne, and he likewise saw full well the baronet had somehow or another obtained a still deeper hold upon him than even that, but how or in reference to what circumstance he could not conjecture.

"Will you explain yourself, Huntingdon?" accordingly asked the bewildered and terrified nobleman. "Will you tell me what all this means? Venetia, I appeal to you, is it to be peace or war between us?"

"A treaty of peace, if you will," responded Lady Sackville, who had hitherto remained a silent but not uninterested witness of the scene. Then raising her veil and bending her indignant looks upon the marquis, she added, "But it must be a treaty of peace accompanied by guarantees and securities, and those can only be explained in the presence of Lady Ernestina Dysart."

"Lady Sackville's remark furnishes the key to the whole business," observed the baronet, "and to cut the discussion short, I do this." Then, as he pulled the gilded bell-rope, he said, "Now your lordship can give orders for Lady Ernestina to be fetched hither."

Brockman speedily answered the summons, and Lord Leveson, mastering his emotions as well as he was able, gave him that message which, as the reader has already seen,

was delivered to Ernestina through the medium of her lady's-maid.

When Ernestina, in pursuance of this message, repaired to the Gilded Saloon, she first noticed her uncle pacing uneasily to and fro. Then her eyes rested upon the baronet, to whom she bowed with haughty coldness, while a blush at the same time suffused her countenance, as she felt that he must entertain a very mean and contemptuous opinion of her indeed after her conduct in the affair of Louisa Stanley. But her looks, speedily flitting away from Sir Douglas Huntingdon, fell upon the countenance of Venetia, whom she knew by sight, having once or twice beheld her riding in her carriage in the park.

"Lady Ernestina Dysart," said the baronet, "this is Lady Sackville."

A scarcely perceptible bow took place on either side, for those two women felt that they stood as enemies in each other's presence. But even while thus exchanging this slight salutation, they darted upon each other a look of scrutinizing curiosity. Indeed, the two handsomest ladies in London, perhaps in all England, were at this moment face to face, and the mutual hostility which they experienced arose not from the comparatively lofty rivalry of beauty, but from the meaner and more paltry cause that each was acquainted with certain secrets regarding the other, thus placing them, as it were, mutually in each other's power.

"Now that her ladyship is present," Sir Douglas Huntingdon hastened to observe, "we will, with your permission, my lord, repair to the Crimson Drawing-room."

"And wherefore?" demanded Leveson, gazing in stupid astonishment upon Sir Douglas, while Lady Ernestina grew more and more nervous every instant.

"You will see anon," was the baronet's reply. "Wherefore waste time in useless questions and answers?"

"True," muttered the marquis, feeling that the sooner all suspense was got rid of the better. "Come, then, to the Crimson Drawing-room."

And Lord Leveson accordingly led the way thither, followed by Venetia (who drew her veil down), Ernestina, and the baronet. Brockman, whom they encountered on the landing, hastened to light the wax candles in the draw-

ing-room, in obedience to his lordship's order. When this was done and the valet had retired, both the marquis and Ernestina bent their looks with evident anxiety upon the baronet for an explanation of his proceedings, but they were still more amazed, and likewise alarmed, when Huntingdon advanced toward the door opening into the mysterious suite of apartments. Finding it locked, — for the Hangman had fastened it again on passing that way ere now, — the baronet said, in a voice which showed that he meant to be obeyed, " Your lordship will be pleased to open this door."

" For what purpose? " asked the nobleman, trembling with the very vagueness of his apprehensions.

But a mortal terror now seized upon Lady Ernestina, for the thought instantaneously flashed to her mind that the presence of Daniel Coffin in that suite of apartments was most probably connected with the present proceeding of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Perceiving, however, the necessity of maintaining her presence of mind for any emergency that might transpire, she exerted all her moral strength to subdue her agonizing emotions and become equal to the ordeal through which it seemed as if she were doomed to pass.

" The key, my lord! " ejaculated Huntingdon, impetuously. " Wherefore persist in thus wasting valuable time? "

Without giving utterance to another word either of remonstrance or remark, Lord Leveson at once produced the key and opened the door.

" Now let us walk in," said the baronet, leading the way into the first room of that mysterious suite, — not the room, be it understood, containing the mechanical chairs, but the one luxuriously furnished with sofas arranged all around against the walls in the Oriental fashion.

Having brought one of the wax candles in his hand from the Crimson Drawing-room, Sir Douglas proceeded to light those which stood on the mantel of this elegantly furnished apartment; and observing that the door into the next room of the suite stood open, he so held the light for a moment as to enable him to plunge his looks across that room, so as to ascertain that the door at the extremity leading into the gallery was likewise opened. These observations he made with inward satisfaction, for he felt confident

that wherever the Hangman might be concealed, he would hear the signal previously concerted for his appearance.

While Sir Douglas was lighting the candles, Venetia took a seat upon the sofa and Lady Ernestina placed herself at a little distance. The marquis leaned his elbow on the mantel, and gazed with evident uneasiness upon the baronet, who thus so coolly but yet so appropriately acted as master of the ceremonies in the proceeding which he himself appeared to have so strangely got up.

"Now, my lord," said the baronet, throwing himself negligently upon the sofa, "it is time that we should come to an understanding together upon a certain subject. This subject is the claim which you assert with regard to Lady Sackville, — a claim which I cannot denominate as one of love, nor which I need particularize at all. Suffice it to say that now, this night and for evermore, must a settlement of the matter take place. But how stands the affair? Let us see. Accident has made your lordship acquainted with certain circumstances which Lady Sackville does not wish revealed, whereas your lordship threatens her with a revelation of those circumstances unless she will consent to listen favourably to your overtures. But in me behold the sincere, conscientious, and resolute friend of Lady Sackville, — once the friend of your lordship, and still disposed to continue your lordship's friend provided we come to an amicable understanding this night."

"And that understanding?" demanded Lord Leveson, impatiently.

"A treaty of peace," responded Huntingdon, "as Lady Sackville herself hinted ere now, but with such guarantees for its inviolable maintenance on your lordship's part — "

"And those guarantees?" exclaimed the marquis, interrogatively.

"Listen," rejoined the baronet, "and a few words will explain them. On the one side, you are acquainted with certain secrets relative to Lady Sackville, and you hold them in terror over her; but, on the other hand, Lady Sackville is acquainted with certain secrets relative to you, and therefore she balances her power against yours. The consequence is, that if you expose Lady Sackville she will expose you, and therefore Lady Sackville and yourself stand upon equal terms."

"No such thing!" exclaimed the marquis, thinking to himself that if the baronet's scheme went no further than this it was not a very formidable one, after all. "For, look you, and understand the matter well," he continued, his tone and manner becoming more exultant as he continued. "The things that I know concerning Lady Sackville may be proclaimed without causing any injury to redound upon myself. But this is not the case with her. Let her go and tell that I possess this suite of rooms, explain all the mysteries of that gallery yonder, and she will be confessing that she has visited this museum of exquisite indelicacies and refined immoralities. Tell the tale of the mechanical chairs, say that Lady Sackville herself has been caught in one, and that Louisa Stanley has been similarly ensnared, and will the reputation of either lady be enhanced by proclaiming the fact that they have ever set foot within these rooms? No, for their own sake this tale will be kept quiet. Then, as for the affair of Ariadne Varian, I do not exactly know in what relation the girl may stand to you, Sir Douglas, but I think that if she possess the feelings of delicacy for which you have given her credit in my hearing, she will not thank you for making her history a common topic and herself the theme of general discourse. Therefore, all the secrets which you know concerning me are secrets which neither you, Sir Douglas, nor you, Lady Sackville, will choose to proclaim aloud, for your own sakes, and for the sake of those in whom you are interested."

"You therefore believe, my lord," said Huntingdon, "that you stand on the vantage-ground and that you can dictate your own terms to Lady Sackville?" and as the baronet thus spoke, his lip curled with a smile of defiance.

"I do believe that I stand upon that vantage-ground," replied the Marquis of Leveson, observing the smile, and not exactly liking it. "Have you anything more to say?"

"Yes, you force me into further explanations," rejoined the baronet. "Have you any regard for your niece, Lady Ernestina? And has her ladyship no secrets which she would be sorry to have revealed?"

"'Tis a manly proceeding," exclaimed Ernestina, her cheeks flushing and her eyes darting fire, "for you to make war upon me."

"It is not I who make war upon your ladyship," answered

the baronet. "It is Lady Sackville who is availing herself of all the weapons of defence with which circumstances have armed her against the Marquis of Leveson. And therefore, if his lordship have really no regard for you, Lady Ernestina, he may indeed perhaps occupy the vantage-ground in respect to Lady Sackville; but if, on the other hand, his lordship has any regard for the reputation and honour of his niece — "

"But what know you of Lady Ernestina?" demanded Lord Leveson, hastily, — "that she appeared to be placed in a somewhat suspicious position with regard to Louisa Stanley — "

"Certainly that is one fact, my lord," exclaimed the baronet, "but it is nothing, absolutely nothing, it sinks into utter contempt, in comparison with the part which Lady Ernestina played in sending her own husband to the scaffold."

A shriek thrilled from the lips of Ernestina, while the Marquis of Leveson started as if suddenly galvanized, and a smile of exultation and gratified revenge lighted up the countenance of Venetia.

"Ah! now you perceive that I am indeed acquainted with secrets of a tremendous import," continued the baronet, glancing from the startled nobleman to his horror-stricken niece, who sat, pale and trembling, upon the sofa, gasping for breath, and with her eyes staring wildly, "and now perhaps it can be understood wherefore I deemed it proper, or, at all events, expedient, for Lady Ernestina Dysart to be present on this occasion. And if you ask me why I chose this apartment as the scene of our discussion, let me remind her ladyship that it belongs to the suite in which a compact was entered into by herself, a certain personage who shall be nameless, and a man holding a fearful and a dreaded office, — a compact in virtue of which the late Paul Dysart was cheated by false hope until the very last instant. Therefore, as the public executioner himself is no stranger to the mysteries and the infamies of this suite of apartments, surely the scene of such atrocities, such devilries, and such abominations as these rooms have witnessed is the most fitting for such a debate as the present."

At this moment a shadow darkened the threshold communicating with the next room, and Daniel Coffin made his appearance.

"O God!" groaned Lady Ernestina, in a paroxysm of ineffable anguish, and she covered her face with her hands to shut out that dreadful being from her view.

The Marquis of Leveson gave vent to an ejaculation of mingled rage and disgust. As for Venetia, whose veil was thickly folded over her countenance, though for a moment a shudder passed over her form on thus beholding the public executioner, yet at the next instant all sense of loathing was absorbed in that of triumph.

"Here is the witness," exclaimed the baronet, "who can prove whether or not Lady Ernestina Dysart was the means of sealing the doom of her own husband."

"O God! O God!" groaned the unhappy woman, writhing under the contortions of the heart's transcending anguish.

"Sir Douglas Huntingdon," said the Marquis of Leveson, suddenly walking straight up to the baronet, clutching him by the arm, and speaking in a low, hollow tone, "put an end to this dreadful scene and I will accept any terms you choose to dictate. But, for God's sake, spare my niece."

"Not to me must you appeal, my lord, not to me," returned Huntingdon, "but to Lady Sackville, whom you have menaced, outraged, humiliated — "

"Ah! hers is the triumph now!" rejoined the marquis, bitterly. Then, accosting her abruptly as she sat still closely veiled upon the sofa, he said, "Will your ladyship say one kind word to Huntingdon on our behalf, for the sake of my niece and myself, or shall I fall down upon my knees at your feet — "

"No, no, this is sufficient," hastily observed Venetia. "Sir Douglas will negotiate with you."

"Good!" ejaculated the marquis. Then, with a low bow to Venetia, he drew the baronet aside, saying, "What are your conditions? Name them."

"You know them, already," rejoined the baronet. "Inviolable secrecy in those matters which have come to your knowledge relative to Lady Sackville, a cessation of all overtures, persecutions, and proposals to her in future."

"But you ere now spoke of guarantees for the fulfilment of this treaty on my part?" said Lord Leveson, inquiringly.

"Those guarantees, are they not furnished by the circumstances which have just transpired?" demanded the baronet. "The treaty consists of silence, secrecy, and

abstinence from all hostility on your part, and the guarantee is that if you violate this compact you must expect no mercy to be shown toward your niece, Lady Ernestina."

" Enough, enough, it is a bargain," returned the marquis in a hurried tone. " I abandon all pretension, all hope, in respect to Venetia," he added, in a scarcely audible voice. " But, for God's sake, spare my niece, spare my family the infamy that such an exposure," and he glanced toward the Hangman, " would entail upon it."

" Yes, upon the conditions stipulated you shall be spared that crowning degradation," said the baronet. " But mark you well, should the private affairs of Lady Sackville — you know what I mean — become whispered abroad ever so lightly, should even the faintest rumour of those secrets obtain currency, the authorship will be at once attributed to yourself or to Lady Ernestina, and then pitilessly, without remorse, — unhesitatingly, indeed, — shall everything be divulged concerning the mode adopted to send Dysart to the scaffold and to lull him into security through the medium of the public executioner himself. You understand me? "

" I do," responded the Marquis of Leveson, in a low, deep tone, more indicative of a sense of utter humiliation than of angry passion.

The baronet turned away and accosted Daniel Coffin, who for the two or three minutes that had elapsed since he appeared upon the threshold had been leaning in a free and easy manner against the door-post, viewing with the sardonic satisfaction of a Mephistopheles the sensation which his presence had excited.

" You may now take your departure," said the baronet, placing a purse in his hands. " There are the remaining hundred guineas due to you for your services in this matter."

" 'Tisn't always that I get two hundred guineas so cheap," observed the Hangman, with a coarse laugh. " Good night, my lord, good night all," and stalking through the apartment, he issued forth by the door leading into the Crimson Drawing-room.

" Now, Venetia," whispered Sir Douglas Huntingdon, as he accosted Lady Sackville, " we also may depart."

Her ladyship accordingly rose from the sofa, and taking the baronet's arm, she accompanied him from the apartment, also passing through the Crimson Drawing-room. She kept

the veil well folded over her countenance, but this precaution was scarcely necessary, for they encountered no one on the landing or the staircase, and the hall-porter was so overcome with drowsiness that he actually rose from his great leathern chair to open the door with his eyes shut, thus performing his duty mechanically rather than in full consciousness.

On issuing forth from Leveson House, Lady Sackville was escorted by the baronet back to Miss Bathurst's residence in Stratton Street. There, however, he left her, parting from her even before the front door was opened to give her admittance. Nevertheless, ere they had thus separated, a few rapidly whispered words of deep and tender meaning passed between them.

Venetia, hurrying up-stairs to Miss Bathurst's bedroom, threw aside the bonnet and cloak, arranged her hair before the mirror, assumed her brightest looks, and returned into the quadrille-room. There she was immediately surrounded by her admirers, who asked what had become of her for the last hour, for it was now midnight, and she had been a little more than an hour absent. " A temporary indisposition that compelled her to retire," was the ready apology, and many a worshipper expressed his grief to learn that her ladyship should have been indisposed even for an instant. The supper-rooms were now thrown open, and thither Venetia repaired, leaning on the arm of some nobleman. Her husband and the Countess of Curzon were still in each other's company, and Venetia saw that an amour was settled in that quarter.

It was about one o'clock when Lord and Lady Sackville took leave of Miss Bathurst and entered their carriage. During the ride back to Carlton House, which only occupied a few minutes, the husband and wife conversed on perfectly indifferent subjects, for Venetia did not think it worth while to let Horace know what had occurred at Lord Leveson's, and, on his part, he had not observed the temporary absence of his wife from his aunt's brilliant saloons.

On reaching Carlton House Lord and Lady Sackville ascended to their own suite of apartments, and on the stairs they encountered Jessica, who made a quick and furtive sign of intelligence to her mistress. Venetia understood it well, — so well, indeed, that it brought a blush of mingled

shame and pleasure to her cheeks. Giving her husband to understand that the prince proposed to pass the night with her, she hastened to her boudoir, pausing for a moment in the passage to intimate to Jessica that she would dispense with her services till the morning. But on entering the boudoir, on passing into that bower where the wax tapers burned upon the mantel and the air was warm and perfumed, the frail but beauteous Venetia was instantaneously clasped, not in the arms of the prince regent, as she had led her husband to suppose, but in the warm and impassioned embrace of Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

It was therefore to a useful purpose that the baronet, through his intimacy with the prince, had learned the secret of the private entrances to Carlton House; and if he had now availed himself of one of them in order to seek the boudoir of the enchanting Venetia, it assuredly was not without her consent nor without a previous stipulation for so blissful a reward.

CHAPTER XVIII

ANOTHER SCENE AT LEVESON HOUSE

When the Hangman, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and Lady Sackville had quitted the room where the strange and exciting discussion took place, Ernestina slowly withdrew her hands from her countenance and rose from her seat. She was pale, deadly pale, and there was a sort of staggering in her gait, as if she experienced a vertigo or was tottering under a load of sorrows too heavy to endure.

" Well, Ernestina, it might have been worse," said Lord Leveson. " Pray, therefore, console yourself."

" Good heavens! how can you ask me to console myself? " murmured his niece, in a hollow tone, " when you perceive that this tremendous secret of mine is already known where it ought not to be, and who can say how widely it may be repeated again? "

" It is no use to anticipate the worst," said the marquis, " or to go forward to meet misfortunes, as if they did not advance upon us quick enough of their own accord. It is tolerably clear that the villain Coffin has whispered the tale to the baronet, who has availed himself of it to coerce me into terms on the present occasion," he added, in a tone of bitter vexation.

" Yes, it must be as you say," rejoined Ernestina. " But it is horrible, horrible, to be in the power of that dreadful man."

" Horrible indeed! " echoed the marquis. " But how the deuce could he possibly have gained admission into the house? How concealed himself in these rooms? "

" An accomplished villain such as he," replied Ernestina, " can insinuate himself anywhere."

" Ah! I see that I must make a complete garrison of the

house against such rascals," observed the marquis. Then, in a peevish tone to himself, he muttered something expressive of his bitter annoyance at having been defeated, so signally defeated, in his designs upon Lady Sackville.

Ernestina, exhausted in mind and body, and longing to be alone, bade her uncle good night and ascended once again to her own chamber. There she locked the door, flung herself with the listless abandonment of despair upon a seat, and gave way to her bitter reflections. But in the midst of this excruciating reverie she was suddenly startled by a sound like the rustling of drapery, and this was immediately followed by the noise of something moving in the direction of the bed. The room was spacious, and the fireplace at which Ernestina was sitting was a dozen yards from the couch. Springing to her feet, she held her breath to listen and gazed with straining eyes toward the bed. Heavens! it was indeed no delusion. Something was moving, some one was there, and as the sickening truth struck upon her comprehension, the terrible fear was indeed confirmed by the appearance of a man thrusting himself forth from under the bed. Ah, horror! horror! it was the public executioner!

A shriek, but low, and almost stifled with the harrowing nature of the feelings that produced it, fell from Ernestina's lips as she darted toward the bell-rope. But quick as lightning the thought flashed to her mind that she was so utterly in the man's power as to render exposure of him an inevitable step to the exposure of herself. She therefore stopped suddenly short, fixed upon him her wildly staring eyes, and with her quivering lips, that were as pale as ashes, she gave utterance to a few hoarse words which were well-nigh choked by the feelings that swelled up, as it were, into her very throat.

"What means this intrusion here?" was the demand which her parched tongue and white lips thus framed.

"A pretty question to a man who has done so much for you!" exclaimed Coffin, with a horrible leer. "One would really think that you great ladies of fashion hadn't a bit of gratitude about you."

"In one word, what want you?" demanded Ernestina, her heart becoming ice to its centre. "Is it money, more money? Are you insatiable?"

"Insatiable? Yes, but not at this moment for gold, — 'tis for love," returned the Hangman.

"Love!" echoed Ernestina, with a fearful quivering in the voice, for the design which the wretch's words revealed suddenly conjured up before her mental vision a new danger, one of even a more tremendous character than any which had previously menaced her.

"And why not love?" cried the Hangman, his looks wandering slowly over her fine form with the gloating avidity of brutal fashion. "Do you think I haven't got the same feelings as other people? And if I am now speaking to you in this manner, you have only yourself to thank for it. I came to this house to-night for quite another purpose, but on finding my way into the gallery just now, who should I see there but your ladyship?"

"True!" murmured the miserable Ernestina, a rush of blood crimsoning her previously pale countenance.

"Ah! now you look handsomer than ever," ejaculated the Hangman. "But as I was telling you, if I had not seen your ladyship in that place filled with such precious objects for a delicate creature like yourself to contemplate, I should never have thought of proposing what I am going to do now. But since, as a matter of course, you went there to feast your eyes with all those pretty things, it is quite clear you are not overparticular, and as variety is charming and you have had a prince for your lover, perhaps now you won't object to accept Mr. Daniel Coffin in the same capacity?"

Stupefied with dread horror, Ernestina stood gazing in speechless vacuity upon that man who dared to address her in this language. But did her ears deceive her, was it a chimera of the brain, or could it be really true that this loathsome wretch, this hideous monster, could imagine for a moment that she, the high-born, tenderly nurtured, fastidiously reared lady of rank, should abandon herself to the embraces of such a revolting animal?

Good heavens! could it indeed be possible? Yes, as she gazed upon that ruffian, his looks, his manner, all demonstrated that his fearful words had indeed expressed the still more appalling purposes of his soul, and, with a low moan of ineffable anguish, Ernestina staggered back a few paces and sank upon a seat.

"Come, come," said the Hangman, impatiently, "I really can't understand you ladies of fashion a bit. You don't mind employing a man like me to do all your dirty work, — dig a hole in your garden by night to bury a dead body, gammon a husband with hopes that are never to be fulfilled so as to send him to the scaffold — "

"Hush, hush!" exclaimed Ernestina, once more starting from her seat, and this time in a positive agony of fearful excitement, for a flame was diffused throughout her entire being, molten lead appeared to be coursing through her veins, and the very chords of her brain seemed to be strung to the extremest verge of tension. "Monster, fiend, devil, I will no longer endure this constant persecution at your hands!"

"What is the use of calling me names?" interrupted the Hangman, with a savage growl, though his looks still burned with a fierce desire. "I tell you again that it is your own fault that I am now talking to you in this way. Seeing you in that gallery, in the midst of all those figures and pictures, put queer notions into my head, and as I watched you from behind the curtain where I was concealed, I thought to myself that, after all, you are one of the handsomest ladies I ever saw in my life. So I came to a certain resolution, and after the scene that took place just now, instead of leaving the house, I thought to myself that if I could only find your ladyship's chamber I might make myself happy and comfortable there for the rest of the night. So I crept up-stairs to this floor, and as the door of this very room stood open, I peeped in. That glance was enough. By the mere look of the room, the knicknacks on the dressing-table, the mourning dresses hanging up in that clothes-press there that stands open, all these things told me in an instant that this was your ladyship's chamber. So here I am, and here I mean to remain till daylight."

While the Hangman was thus speaking, Ernestina interrupted him not, because she was revolving a thousand different and wildly impossible schemes in her mind. To pretend to yield to his humour and poison him, or to procure a knife and stab him to the heart, or else to fetch a pistol from her uncle's room and shoot him through the head, or, again, to alarm the house and have him thrust forth at any risk, — these were some of the projects which entered her

imagination, but which were discarded one after the other, as soon as conceived. Thus, by the time he had ceased speaking, she had decided upon nothing, but was plunged in still more painful bewilderment, terror, and dismay than at first.

"You cannot be serious in what you say?" she suddenly cried, in a fit of desperation. "Tell me what will satisfy you, what sum do you require? Name the amount, and it shall be yours. Come with me to my uncle's chamber, and he will at once satisfy you on that score."

"It is not gold that I want just at this moment," said the Hangman, doggedly. "I have made two hundred guineas to-day from Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and six days hence I am to have five hundred more from the prince regent, which, by the bye, you yourself are to bring me — "

"I! What mean you?" exclaimed Ernestina, in amazement.

"Oh, it is all cut and dried between me and the prince," returned the Hangman. "I honoured his Royal Highness with my noble presence at his crib — I mean Carlton House — yesterday, and we had a cosy chat together. I told him that I did not want to be made a marquis or a duke or an earl, or any nonsense of that sort, but what I wanted was coin, blunt, cash, rhino."

"Well, what next?" inquired Ernestina.

"The prince promised that I should have five hundred guineas in a week. That is to say, next Wednesday night, at eleven o'clock, in the middle recess of Westminster Bridge on the left hand side going over, your ladyship is to put into my hands the sum named."

"But what on earth made the prince fix upon me?" demanded Ernestina, all her thoughts now turned into another channel.

"Oh, simply because he said that as you was interested in the matter, you ought to take a part in it. But it is possible, you know, that the prince may think better of it and send somebody else instead of your ladyship. It don't matter to me who it is, so long as some one keeps the appointment and brings the money."

While the Hangman was thus speaking, a thought which had suddenly sprung vaguely up in Ernestina's mind rapidly expanded into a tangible consistency, and by the time he

had concluded, it had settled down into a stern and inflexible resolution.

"The prince, you say, intends me to become the bearer of a large sum of money for you next Wednesday night?" and as she spoke, she assumed an air of comparative indifference.

"Yes, I have already told you so," returned the Hangman. "Middle recess, Westminster Bridge, next Wednesday night, at eleven o'clock, punctual to the instant, — that's the appointment."

"And you will be there?" said Ernestina, with a rapid sidelong glance at the man.

"Yes, trust me for that," he answered. "I should think so, when five hundred guineas are to be got."

"You will be there in person?" repeated Ernestina, evidently with a deepening preoccupation of thought, "and you will not send anybody else?"

"No, not I," ejaculated Daniel Coffin. "But why are you putting all these questions?"

"Because, because," faltered Ernestina, the blood again rushing to her cheeks and then leaving them pale as death once more, so that it was evident she was swayed by some powerful emotion, or else perhaps by the sudden apprehension that the resolution which had ere now settled in her mind was suspected by the Hangman.

"Because what?" he demanded, impatiently.

"Because," she repeated, instantaneously recovering her self-possession, and now speaking with apparent earnestness and without hesitation, "because if we are to meet that night, in the way you have described, you can in mercy accord me a delay until then, so that I may bring my mind to reflect with less aversion upon the sacrifice you demand."

"Ah!" ejaculated Coffin, "I understand your ladyship's tricks. You think to induce me to leave you now, and then you will trust either to the chapter of accidents or to the cooling down of my desires to save you from what I am now seeking? But I don't mean to be trifled with in this manner. Mine you shall be to-night, by fair means if you will, if not, by foul."

And as he thus spoke, Daniel Coffin advanced toward Ernestina, his eyes flaming with lascivious passion.

"Stand back!" she cried, suddenly armed with the

courage of despair. " I cannot, I will not submit to you this night. The demand is so sudden, so overwhelming, and then I have suffered, too, so much anguish from other causes — But I swear, most solemnly, sacredly swear, that if you will only grant me the delay until that night when we shall meet on Westminster Bridge — "

" No! " exclaimed the Hangman, " not a day — not an hour, not a minute."

" Then, by Heaven! " cried Ernestina, darting to the bell-pull and seizing it in her hand, " I will not submit this night."

There was something so resolute in her manner, wild and frenzied though it were, that Daniel Coffin was staggered, and it struck him that in the whirl of her agitated feelings she might alarm the whole house, thereby occasioning an exposure equally unprofitable and dangerous to them both. He accordingly began to cool down somewhat in his desires, and feeling the necessity of consenting to a compromise, he nevertheless, with characteristic greed, resolved that it should be one based upon immediate advantage to himself.

" Come, what will you give me to agree to your proposal? " he said, with a tone and manner full of sullen menace.

" There is my purse," replied Ernestina, still retaining her grasp upon the bell-rope with one hand and pointing with the other toward the toilet-table, " and you will find a few jewels in that box. Take them all, everything you fancy, and then leave me."

" But what security have I got," growled the Hangman, " that you will prove more condescending when we meet next Wednesday night? "

" Shall I not be as much in your power then," asked the lady, " as I am now? The relative circumstances of our position will not be changed. You can still threaten me, still coerce, still intimidate me; but by that time I shall have brought my mind to view the thing with less horror, less aversion, and less disgust."

" Well, be it so," said the Hangman. " And now mind me, that when we meet next Wednesday night I stand no more nonsense, but you shall go with me to some place where we can be comfortable together — "

" Yes, yes," exclaimed Ernestina, her soul revolting from his words and looks down to its utter profundities. " I swear

most solemnly, most sacredly, that I will do as you desire. But once more I insist that you leave me now."

" Well, well, I sha'n't stay much longer," rejoined Coffin, savagely. Then advancing to the toilet-table, he helped himself to the purse and the jewels.

Having secured these spoils about his person, the ruffian unlocked the door, flung a parting look of deep and menacing meaning upon Ernestina, warning her not to forget her pledge, and then stole forth from the chamber. The lady retained her hold upon the bell-pull for nearly a minute. Then, feeling satisfied that the dreadful man had indeed taken his departure, she hastened to relock the door, remaining alone, no longer with the excitement of bewildering thoughts, but in the cold, deep, immovable sternness of that resolve to which she had come.

CHAPTER XIX

ST. JAMES'S PALACE

In one of the earlier chapters of this work we have described Florence Eaton. About nineteen years of age, invested with a Madonna-like beauty, the innocence of which surrounded her as with a celestial halo, possessing a complexion of the purest white, dazzlingly transparent, and with the gentlest tint of the rose-leaf upon her cheeks, she was a being to whom the epithet of angelic may be applied. Her hair, of the lightest brown tinged with a golden hue, and seeming in the sunbeams to be of that precious shade which belongs to the silk when gathered fresh from the silkworm, was worn in a profusion of ringlets falling upon her bright and polished shoulders. The tranquil lustre as well as the hue of heaven was in her eyes of soft azure; no coral was brighter than her lips; no Grecian statue was ever chiselled with a more classical precision than that which marked her exquisite profile.

Then her shape, we have already described it as that of the sylph, blending perfection of symmetry with grace and elegance of carriage. The beautiful arching of the neck was of swanlike curvature, the bust, gently developed, was perfect in its virgin contours, and as she walked, her form exhibited all the willowy elasticity of girlhood.

Gay and happy in her artless innocence was this charming creature, and in her liveliest moments her laugh came gushing forth so merrily melodious that it seemed as if the teeth appearing between the parting coral of the lips were themselves strings of musical pearls. Guile and deception were unknown to her. She was as ignorant of the duplicities, the falsities, and the artificialities of the world as the bird of paradise in its own genial clime is ignorant of the hail, the

frost, the snow, and the ice of the hyperborean regions to the northward of inhospitable Labrador.

It may have chanced that the reader, while roving in a garden during the warm months when nature puts forth all the brightest and the best of her floral decorations, has observed a beautiful lily timidly revealing its virgin purity in the midst of all the most flaunting and gaudy occupants of the glowing parterres. That chaste and stainless lily seemed, as it were, out of place, unless for the purpose of contrast, by the side of full-blown peonies blushing their deepest red, groups of tulips displaying their variegated hues in all the pomp of their gaudy glory, the pinks drooping on their slender stalks, the marigolds vying with the bright yellow of the sun, the red roses expanding in all the pride belonging to Flora's cherished favourites, the glaring wall-flowers bright with their mingling yellow, warm sienna, and rich brown tints, the bluebells deep as the indigo seen in the hyacinth of India's plains, and all the other ornaments of the garden that force themselves most obtrusively upon the gaze. The eye, therefore, when contemplating such a scene, and when intoxicated with the blaze of beauty belonging to all that floral pomp, has settled at last with a feeling of relief and with a touching interest upon that fair, chaste, and modest lily appearing in the midst of such overwhelming gaud and grandeur. Apply this illustration to the world of fashion, and if amidst the brilliant galaxy of splendid duchesses, exquisite marchionesses, superb countesses, and magnificent ladies of all grades and degrees of aristocratic rank, you behold one charming, retiring, and unsophisticated girl scarcely conscious of her own beauty, and calculated to please and interest the eye, not to dazzle and overwhelm the senses, then have you found your lily amongst your flaunting, gaudy pageantry of flowers. And such was Florence Eaton.

Four or five days had elapsed after the incidents contained in the few last chapters, and it was about noon, when Lady Florimel said to her niece, " My dear Florence, I think that I have a little treat in store for you to-day."

" What is it, my dear aunt? " inquired the beauteous girl, gazing up with a smiling countenance from the embroidery in which she was engaged.

" You know, my dear girl," replied Pauline, " that her

Royal Highness the Princess Sophia was here a few days ago and likewise again yesterday. Amongst other things the princess said to me, was that if ever you should feel inclined to visit the State Apartments at St. James's Palace — "

" Oh, indeed I should be delighted," exclaimed Florence, " for inasmuch as you have an objection to attending the levees which the Prince of Wales sometimes holds there, and as you do not wish me to be presented at court, I shall have no opportunity of seeing those superb apartments unless privately, as you propose."

" And do you wish to be presented at court? " asked Lady Florimel, gazing earnestly and not without some little feeling of uneasiness upon her lovely niece.

" Oh, no," exclaimed the artless girl, her silver voice as expressive of sincerity as were her innocent looks. " You have taught me to regard all regal splendour and princely show as being not only valueless but also inconsistent with the true spirit of the age, and I can assure you, my dear aunt, that I am not faithless to your admirable teachings."

" Then you are my own dear girl," said Pauline, infinitely relieved by this answer. " But to return to what we were ere now saying, I propose to take you at once to St. James's Palace, to pass an hour with the princess and visit the State Apartments. Hasten and achieve your toilet. The carriage is ordered for half-past twelve."

" And do not you mean to accompany us, my dear uncle? " asked Florence, approaching Lord Florimel, who was seated on the sofa reading the newspaper.

" No, dear Florence," he replied, with a smile. " The princess has invited you ladies in so cordial and friendly a manner that the presence of one of the sterner sex would be a constraint upon the interesting coterie. And therefore I am excluded."

Florence, satisfied with this answer, hastened away to her own apartment to prepare for the visit, and the moment she had quitted the drawing-room, Pauline said to her husband, " Do you not think, Gabriel, that you had better accompany us, after all? "

" If you wish it, my dear Pauline," was the reply, as the nobleman gazed affectionately upon his handsome wife. " But I think that I have already convinced you it would

be more becoming for yourself to accompany Florence alone. In that cold reserve which you may exhibit toward the prince, Florence will see nought save the distant respect which a lady would naturally show in the presence of his Royal Highness. But were I to find myself in the company of the prince, I could scarcely manifest even the most ordinary politeness. For though years and years have passed since the date of poor Octavia's wrongs, and also of the base outrages which he dared — though so fruitlessly — attempt toward yourself, yet is the memory of them immortal with me. All things considered, therefore, you would do well to go alone with Florence. Besides, you say that although the Princess Sophia will not be present at the interview, yet she has promised that the master of her household shall attend upon you."

"Oh, it was not through any fear that I proposed you should accompany us," exclaimed Pauline. "Even were his Royal Highness inclined to renew toward me, either by word or look, the insults of bygone times, the presence of his daughter would assuredly prove an adequate check. Or else," added Pauline, in a more serious tone, "must he indeed be far, far more depraved than we even know him to be."

Lady Florimel now retired to perform the little requisites of her own toilet, and at half-past twelve her ladyship and Florence stepped into the carriage. In a few minutes they were set down at St. James's Palace, that dingy, rambling, ignoble-looking old brick building, the exterior of which has the appearance of a tumbling down barrack, but upon whose interior hundreds and thousands of pounds have been expended to minister to the extravagance, the pomp, and the parade of royalty. Poor unfortunate working classes, how have ye been doomed to the most crushing toil in order to furnish forth the splendour of those palaces which exist as the trophies of that tyranny which has achieved your wretchedness and slavery!

On alighting at St. James's Palace, Lady Florimel and the Honourable Miss Eaton were received by Sir Robert Conway, the master of the Princess Sophia's household. This gentleman was about sixty years of age, of courtly appearance, and one who had spent all his life as a hanger-on of royalty. He had passed through all those grades of

aristocratic flunkyism which belong to the hierarchy of royal households, having gradually risen from page of the back stairs through the various phases of page of the front stairs, silver stick, gold stick, groom of the stole, and Heaven knows what beside in the service of the king, until he settled down into the comfortable place which we now find him occupying about the person of the Princess Sophia.

Heavens! what annals of the court were contained in this man's memory. All the cells of his brain were so many encyclopedias filled with court anecdotes, intrigues, scandals, depravities, and scoundrelisms. How many villainies amongst proud nobles had he been the means of hushing up! How many frailties on the part of high-born ladies had he been instrumental in veiling from the public eye! How many noble lords had he known who were the most ignoble rascals on the face of God's earth! How many maids of honour had he seen in his time who were no maids at all! How many gentlemen of the bedchamber had he been acquainted with whose private deeds were so ungentlemanly that even at Crockford's den of infamy they were scouted as blacklegs! How many ladies in waiting had he known who were so unladylike as to prefer their husband's grooms to their husbands themselves! How many Royal Highnesses had he bowed to who by their conduct deserved to have been styled royal basenesses!

Then, was he not also — this Sir Robert Conway — a veritable perambulating court guide, a peripatetic blue book of the aristocracy? He knew everybody and everything in the spheres of the court, high life, and fashion. Did anybody happen to say in his presence, "By the bye, who did Lord Cranbury marry?" he would immediately have the answer ready to fall from the tip of his tongue, to the effect, for example's sake, that "the Right Honourable Augustus Octavius Stanhope St. James, sixth Earl of Cranbury, married the Honourable Miranda Amelia Jacintha Constantina Arlington, third daughter of Fitzallan Seymour Portman Aulet, third Baron Rochdale, who married Lady Eliza Alexandrina Catherina Marietta Berkeley." In all other court and aristocratic matters, even to the minutest details of pedigree and genealogy, was this master of the household equally well versed and precise, and for this

reason he was considered in the highest circles to be one of the cleverest men in all England. Indeed, a professor of a hundred different languages, half a dozen sciences, and as many arts would not have obtained half the repute for talent and learning that was enjoyed by this wretched humdrum on the strength of the most trumpery, worthless, and debasing kind of knowledge to which a man could possibly degrade his intellect.

This great personage it was who received Lady Florimel and Miss Florence Eaton as they alighted from their carriage at St. James's Palace, and he forthwith conducted them to a magnificent saloon belonging to the suite of apartments occupied by the Princess Sophia. On introducing the ladies into the presence of the princess, Sir Robert Conway withdrew, and her Royal Highness received her visitants with the kindest cordiality. Luncheon was immediately served, and when it was over the princess said, "Now, my dear Lady Florimel, I will summon Sir Robert Conway to escort you and your sweet niece to the State Apartments, but as I myself am somewhat indisposed, I hope you will excuse me from accompanying you."

The master of the household was accordingly sent for, and he speedily made his appearance, all bowings and scrapings, smiles and willingness, to conduct the ladies whithersoever they chose. Accordingly, Lady Florimel and Florence accompanied him to the State Apartments, which we shall not pause to describe; much less shall we linger to chronicle one single word of all the encomia which Sir Robert Conway lavished upon every feature of those rooms. Suffice it to say that Florence, in the artless simplicity of her character and with that natural good taste which had been fostered by her aunt, was much disappointed at finding far more of gingerbread tinsel than of sterling decorations, and much more gilding and gaudiness than works of art and masterpieces of the limner's pencil.

Having finished the inspection of the State Apartments, Sir Robert Conway, who had already received his cue from the Princess Sophia, proposed to introduce the ladies to an apartment well known as the King's Closet. This room was the one where the British sovereigns were wont to transact private business on the occasion of levees, drawing-rooms, etc., held at St. James's Palace, and in that apart-

ment many of the most diabolical laws and decrees have at different times received the royal signature.

Into this room did the master of the household now conduct Lady Florimel and Florence Eaton. Pauline, who knew what was to happen, had some difficulty in concealing a certain amount of agitation and excitement which arose from the prospect of the interview that was now close at hand. As for Florence, totally unsuspecting whom she was about to meet, she followed her aunt in gay and cheerful confidence; but when Sir Robert Conway, on throwing open the door, exclaimed, "Good heavens! what have I done? the prince regent is here!" the lovely girl trembled all over at the sudden idea of finding herself face to face with his Royal Highness. Oh, if she had only known, if she had only entertained the slightest scintillation of a suspicion that the prince was in reality her father, the author of her being, how different would have been her emotions, how far more solemnly and pathetically interesting this hour of her life!

As a matter of course, Sir Robert Conway affected to be overwhelmed with confusion in observing the prince regent in the Royal Closet. Pauline likewise stepped back a few paces, but with a really natural recoil from the destroyer of her sister, and not with any affected surprise or alarm, while her young, timid, and beautiful niece clung to her arm in vague terror lest this intrusion on their part should be visited by some unpleasant remonstrance.

The prince, who as a matter of course through prearrangement had been located in the Royal Closet, now stepped forward, and with that easy yet elegant assurance which characterized him at once exclaimed, "Do not be alarmed, my dear Conway. I presume you have brought these ladies hither to view the apartment, and they shall not be disappointed."

"May it please your Royal Highness," said the courtly Conway, with a low bow, "Lady Florimel and her niece, the Honourable Miss Eaton, will present their duty to your Royal Highness."

Pauline bowed with a matron's dignity, accompanied by a due amount of respectful courtesy, and Florence, recovering her presence of mind at the reassuring words of the prince, made a graceful salutation. This homage on the part of the ladies was acknowledged by what the court

newsman would call " the most gracious condescension " on the part of the prince. At the same time, he flung upon Pauline a look which seemed to say, " I hope there is no longer any ill-feeling between us," and then his eyes settled upon his lovely, angelic, blushing daughter, that daughter who knew not that she thus stood in her father's presence. But at the same moment, as he beheld that heavenly creature whose charms so far transcended all the representations which rumour had wafted to his ears, and on whose pure and candid brow chastity sat enthroned in alabaster, while vestal innocence beamed in her azure eyes as the sunlight shines in the clear blue of heaven, as the prince, we say, thus gazed upon that sweet ethereal creature, he experienced the father's pride, the parent's joy, and in a moment of uncontrollable and ineffable feeling he drew forth a small case enclosing the miniature of Octavia, the injured, wronged, and perished mother of that lovely girl.

Florence surveyed the prince with the utmost surprise as she witnessed this proceeding, and Pauline, instantly stepping a pace backward, so as to get behind Florence, made a rapid and impatient sign to the prince to warn him of the imprudence of his conduct and chide him for this demonstration of feeling which under the circumstances he ought to have avoided. As for Sir Robert Conway, he stood drawn up in an attitude of attention, but, courtier-like and also childlike, prepared to hear, see, and say nothing.

Perhaps it was one of the few fine moments of the prince's life when he thus became suddenly pliant and ductile to the influence of a father's feelings, and forgetting the necessity of caution, acknowledged the spontaneous sway of nature over the colder sentiment of prudence. It was one of the very few pathetic chapters in his history, and even Pauline, while signalling him to beware what he did, could not help thinking to herself, " This is at least some atonement made to the memory of my deceased sister."

Scarcely had the prince yielded to that sudden and irresistible impulse which thus made him draw forth the miniature portrait of the long dead Octavia, in order to compare it with the living beauty that was now in his presence, when the amazed and even startled look which Florence fixed upon him reminded him of his imprudence, even before he observed the signs which Lady Florimel was

making. No sooner, therefore, had he opened that case and glanced upon that miniature, no sooner, indeed, had his eyes travelled from the features of the mother, as perpetuated by the limner's art, to those of the daughter brilliant with the animation of youthful life, when he closed the case again, and returning it to his pocket, instantaneously took the hand of Florence, saying, "Pardon me, young lady, pardon me, but you suddenly reminded me of a dear friend now no more."

Florence became overwhelmed with confusion, almost with dismay, for she felt that the prince's hand trembled nervously as he held her own, and there was something so peculiar, so touching, so appealing at the moment in his looks, that she experienced the strangest and most unaccountable feeling springing up in her heart. It was as if, all in a moment, she became deeply interested in this prince whom she had never seen before. But, ah, little did she suspect that it was nature asserting its empire within her gentle bosom, and influencing her with those promptings that were so mysterious, so inscrutable, and so profound!

"Permit us to retire, sir," now interjected Lady Florimel, fearful that the scene might go to such a length as to excite suspicion in the mind of Florence, and render some explanation indispensable for the purpose of allaying it.

"Lady Florimel," said the prince, fixing his looks upon her in a peculiar manner, "I hope that your noble husband and yourself will some day favour the reception-rooms at Carlton House with your presence, and that you will be accompanied by your amiable niece."

Pauline bowed, but gave no reply. Then, taking the hand of Florence, she whispered, hastily, "Let us withdraw."

The young lady's thoughts were thrown into such confusion by the prince's manner, the words he had addressed to her, and the emotions which they had suddenly conjured up, that she scarcely knew what she was doing, but mechanically making a graceful salutation, she suffered her aunt to lead her from the room. Sir Robert Conway followed, and when they reached the Princess Sophia's apartment, Florence was so overcome by the powerful yet unaccountable agitation of her feelings that she burst into tears. Lady Florimel threw a rapid glance upon the princess, as much as to say, "Did I not prophesy some such result as this?" and her

Royal Highness shook her head to express her regret that she should have been the means of bringing about this interview between the father and the daughter.

"My dear girl," said Pauline, in the kindest and most soothing manner to Florence, "what afflicts you thus? What feeling causes these tears?"

"Pardon me, my dear aunt," murmured Florence, hastily wiping her eyes, "and intercede on my behalf that her Royal Highness shall forgive me this foolish conduct of mine in her presence. But I could not help it. Some feeling came over me, stronger than myself, — a feeling for which I could not account at the time, and which I am still less able to explain now. It was a temporary weakness, a transitory depression of spirits, produced, most probably, by that sudden excitement which seemed to take possession of his Royal Highness the prince. But I feel better now. Indeed, I am quite recovered, and again do I implore your pardon."

"You have not offended us, my dear girl," said the Princess Sophia, rising from her seat and taking the young maiden's hand in the kindest manner.

To be brief, Florence Eaton speedily recovered her wonted cheerfulness, and in a short time a footman entered to announce that the carriage had arrived. Lady Florimel and her niece resumed their bonnets and scarfs, took leave of the princess, and entered the carriage, which Pauline ordered to drive round Hyde Park ere returning home.

While proceeding to that fashionable lounge maintained by the people's money to enable the aristocracy of London to display their gorgeous equipages and sumptuous apparel, Florence continued to discourse upon the singular incidents of the meeting in the Royal Closet. She expressed her pity for the prince who had been so deeply moved at having the features of a lost friend recalled to his memory, and with a natural artlessness she observed that any one who could be so moved must possess a very excellent disposition. Pauline was vexed to hear her talk in this manner, for she saw that the incident had made a deep impression upon the young maiden's mind, and she did not wish any occurrence to disturb the even tenor of that existence which had hitherto passed in such serene and tranquil happiness. Moreover, Pauline was naturally fearful of her niece obtaining any clue to the discovery of the secret of her birth, for

sad, oh, sad indeed would it be for this innocent, unsophisticated child of nature to have her mind enlightened as to the past and be taught the history of a mother's shame!

The carriage had entered Hyde Park, and Lady Florimel was thinking how she should turn the conversation into another channel, when suddenly loud cries of alarm burst from the lips of several persons walking on the footways on either side of the road, and at the same instant the coachman reined in his horses abruptly. But a crash simultaneously occurred. Fresh ejaculations of terror were heard, the horses of Lady Florimel's carriage were plunging violently, and several people were rushing to the spot. Pauline and Florence, greatly affrighted, looked forth from the windows, and the cause of the stoppage, confusion, and alarming cries was immediately apparent. A gentleman driving a magnificent horse in a gig had found the animal all in a moment become unmanageable, shying at a white pocket-handkerchief which somebody had let fall and which was blowing across the road. Thus suddenly swerving aside, the spirited steed had come in furious collision with the horses of Lady Florimel's carriage. The gig was upset, the gentleman was thrown out and either killed upon the spot or stunned, and the maddened animal dashed away, fleet as an arrow, dragging the vehicle like a thing of no weight behind him.

Such was the incident which occurred, all in a moment, to turn the thoughts alike of Pauline and Florence into a new channel. The footman who stood behind the carriage instantaneously leaped down and joined those persons who had rushed to the spot to render their assistance. The gentleman, on being raised from the ground, was discovered to have been only stunned, not killed. The footman, stepping up to the carriage window, reported this intelligence to Pauline, who at once directed that the gentleman should be lifted into the chariot. But who was he? No one on the spot at the moment knew him. It was therefore impossible to convey him to his own residence, and Pauline commanded the carriage to proceed home to Florimel House in Piccadilly.

A few minutes brought the equipage thither, and the gentleman, who still remained insensible, was lifted into the mansion, conveyed to a chamber, and surrounded by all possible attentions. Medical aid was procured, and in a short time the sufferer was somewhat restored to conscious-

ness, but not sufficiently to speak, and the physicians, while declaring that no fatal result need be dreaded, nevertheless desired that he should be kept perfectly tranquil, as he had evidently received a severe shock from the fall.

When the first excitement attending this incident had somewhat subsided, Lord Florimel bethought himself of searching the stranger's pockets for the purpose of ascertaining, if possible, who he was, as his relations or friends might be uneasy at his absence. His card-case was found, and thence was it discovered that the handsome young invalid, for both good-looking and youthful he assuredly was, as we might have observed before, was Mr. Malvern, of Hanover Square.

CHAPTER XX

THE PRINCESS CHARLOTTE

Scarcely had Lady Florimel's carriage rolled out of the courtyard of St. James's Palace when another equipage, drawn by four horses, dashed into the enclosure. The royal arms were upon the panels of this magnificent barouche, the postilions were clad in elegant jockey attire of sky-blue, and three tall footmen in the royal liveries stood behind the carriage.

The moment this equipage appeared great excitement immediately became visible amongst all the officials, lackeys, and dependents who had previously been lounging about in the courtyard and entrance hall of the palace. But now two lines of bowing individuals were speedily formed from the carriage door to the entrance of the building, and Sir Robert Conway, who came hurrying forward, arrived just in time to assist a young lady to alight. Then, with profound respect and veneration, the old courtier offered this young lady his arm, which she took with unaffected ease and affability of manner, acknowledging with a graceful inclination of her head the low bows made by the two lines of dependents, as she passed between them into the palace. Three ladies in waiting likewise descended from the carriage and followed close behind their youthful mistress; for this young lady who has just arrived at St. James's Palace, and whom we now for the first time introduce to our readers, is the Princess Charlotte, the daughter of the prince regent and the injured Caroline of Brunswick.

Strange coincidence, that on the same day, at the same hour, and within a few minutes of each other, the illegitimate daughter of the prince regent — namely, Florence Eaton —

QUEEN CAROLINE AND PRINCESS CHARLOTTE

Photogravure from Painting by Lawrence.

QUEEN CAROLINE AND PRINCESS CHARLOTTE

Photogravure from painting by Lawrence.

and his legitimate daughter, the Princess Charlotte, should thus visit St. James's Palace!

And here we must pause for a little space to describe her Royal Highness the Princess Charlotte, who was now just eighteen years of age. Handsome she was, assuredly, yet not endowed with that sweet, nymphlike, and angelic beauty which characterized Florence Eaton; but invested with that peculiar style of loveliness — sleepy, luxuriant, and sensuous — which has already been described in an earlier chapter as distinctive of the females belonging to the family of Guelph. Her figure, even at this early age, was already of a richness merging upon embonpoint, but not sufficiently so to diminish its graces. There was, however, a voluptuousness in its contours which was enhanced by the complete exposure of the shoulders and neck, according to the fashion of the time. Short of stature, the princess had little of girlhood's suppleness and lightness of movement. Her slow pace and matron-like gait arose not from any idea of maintaining a dignified bearing, but from the circumstance that in her nature she was what Byron has described as "somewhat languishing and lazy."

Her hair — of a light chestnut, soft as silk and fine in its individual filaments — was far from profuse in quantity, and was worn in frizzly ringlets at the sides, but carelessly gathered up in a knot behind the head. Her complexion was beautifully fair, with an animated bloom upon the cheeks, making them resemble in their healthful plumpness the ripe peach with its mingled damask and vermeil. Her features could not be called regular nor yet classical; and they were also too large and striking for a delicate beauty, — the nose being prominent, the lips full and sensuous, and the chin rounded with the boldness belonging to a profile that indicates strong passions. Her eyes were of a light blue, and looked soft, languishing, and even wanton from beneath their drooping lids; the eyebrows were light, and indeed too delicately pencilled to give a classic finish to the opal of the temples.

To judge more minutely still of the character of the Princess Charlotte from the usual physical indications, we may add that benevolence, generosity, and goodness of heart were in her looks; while an occasional bridling up of the head, a quick flashing of the eye from the midst of its languid

expression, and a sudden flushing of the countenance showed that she possessed a temper impatient of contradiction and which in time might even become overbearing and despotic.

We have said that her Royal Highness was attired in a very low dress, but as a matter of course it was not with her shoulders and bosom thus exposed that she had arrived in the carriage. An elegant scarf was thrown lightly over her neck, and a veil depended from the hat which she wore. This hat was of beaver, with large brims and black plumes, and being worn gracefully, it suited well the somewhat bold and masculine style of her features.

On reaching the landing that communicated with the apartments of the Princess Sophia, the Princess Charlotte quitted the arm of Sir Robert Conway and passed into a dressing-room, followed by her ladies in waiting. There she laid aside her splendid hat and her elegant scarf of purple velvet with its gold fringe; and dispensing with the attendance of her ladies, she proceeded alone to the apartment where the Princess Sophia was seated. The meeting between the aunt and the niece was most affectionate, and when they had exchanged the usual greetings, the Princess Charlotte requested Sophia to dismiss her ladies who were in attendance. This was immediately done, and the royal aunt and niece remained alone together.

We must here observe that for some years past the Princess Charlotte had not resided with her father the prince regent. She dwelt principally with the king and queen at Windsor or Frogmore. That is to say, she was in reality under the protection of old Queen Charlotte, his Majesty George III being at the time a hopeless lunatic. The young princess did not often repair to London, save when in the company of the queen; but occasionally she would make a special trip to St. James's Palace, to visit her aunts who had apartments there; and it was often observed in courtly circles, rumoured throughout the West End, and even hinted at times by the newspaper press, that on such occasions her Royal Highness very seldom called at Carlton House, but saw her father the prince regent at St. James's. We may add that of all the royal family the Princess Sophia was Charlotte's favourite relative, and to this much-loved aunt was she wont to confide all her cares, anxieties, and troubles.

Not many days had elapsed since the Princess Charlotte

had paid Sophia one of these flying visits to which we have alluded; and therefore her appearance at St. James's after so brief an interval, and the request which she now made for the dismissal of the waiting ladies from the room, — added to a certain preoccupation which was visible in her manner, — convinced Sophia that something unpleasant had occurred.

"My dear Charlotte," accordingly said the aunt, the moment her ladies had quitted the apartment, "has anything happened to cause you fresh uneasiness?"

"Oh, my dear aunt," exclaimed the young princess, bursting into tears, "how can I tell you what has occurred? How can I wound your heart so deeply as to speak ill of that mother whom I know you love so fondly?"

"Tell me everything, my dear niece," said the Princess Sophia, "and do not regard my feelings at all. Tell me what has happened. You know that I would do anything to serve you. But come, dry these tears. Should any one enter unexpectedly and see you weeping — "

"Oh, let me weep, let me weep, my dear aunt!" cried the Princess Charlotte, now literally wringing her hands in anguish. "These tears afford a vent for that sorrow which would otherwise cause my heart to burst. For, oh, this pent-up affliction which circumstances so often compel me to restrain seems at times to become a consuming flame and to prey upon my very vitals — "

"Heavens! dear Charlotte," cried the Princess Sophia, now very seriously alarmed, "I know that you grieve on account of your mother, but never, never have I heard you speak so despondingly as at present. Surely, surely something terrible has happened — "

"Yes, something terrible indeed," interrupted the princess; "something of so grave and so serious a nature that I question whether I shall ever return to Windsor again, whether indeed I shall not steal out of England in disguise, and hasten to join my poor dear persecuted mother in Italy."

"For God's sake, compose yourself, dearest Charlotte!" said the Princess Sophia, in the most soothing manner possible. "Instead of giving way to this painful excitement tell me what has occurred, favour me with your confidence, as you have hitherto been wont to do, allow me to give you my advice, and promise me that you will follow it."

"But how will you advise me against your own mother?" exclaimed the young princess, impetuously.

"If my mother be acting wrongly," was the mild and gently remonstrative answer, "I will not scruple to condemn her proceedings as candidly and impartially as I would those of an utter stranger. Far more readily, then, would I protect you, my beloved niece, against even the machinations of my own mother, if such machinations were in progress."

"Pardon me, pardon me, dearest aunt," exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, with a gush of fervid feeling and grateful enthusiasm. "Pardon me, I say, for having mistrusted you for a moment, but I felt at the time as if there were no longer any confidence to be bestowed on a single being upon earth."

"Tell me, Charlotte," said the Princess Sophia, "what it is that has affected you so painfully, so profoundly."

"I will endeavour to restrain my feelings in such a manner," answered the young princess, "as to enable me to give you a calm and intelligible narrative of what has occurred. You know that at Windsor Castle I have free access on all occasions to the queen's private apartments, and that it is never considered necessary for me to send and announce my intention of visiting her Majesty in her own room. You are likewise aware that her Majesty is particularly fond at this time of the year, when the weather is so cold, of sitting in the little room which she calls the boudoir, and which has double doors. Well, at about eleven o'clock this forenoon I repaired as usual to pay my respects to her Majesty, forgetting to ask previously whether she was alone. On reaching the boudoir, I found the outer door ajar, and perhaps you remember how noiselessly it opens? Certain it is that when I opened it the sound could not have been heard inside the room, for the voices that were in conversation did not cease speaking. On hearing those voices, and recognizing one to be the queen's, I was immediately on the point of retiring, under the impression that her Majesty was engaged, when something which fell from her lips suddenly transfixed me to the spot. The words were to this effect: 'But, my dear Mrs. Owen, we have gone too far to retreat. The ruin of the Princess Caroline is resolved upon; it must be accomplished, and I am determined that she shall never, never have a chance of being Queen of England.'

Oh, as these dreadful syllables met mine ears, a cold tremor seized upon me, I shivered violently from head to foot, and should have fallen had I not actually clung to the door-post for support. Then with a mighty effort I so far conquered my emotions as to remain an eager, breathless listener. It was now Mrs. Owen — a name I had sometimes heard before — who spoke. 'I am well aware,' she said, 'of the truth of your Majesty's observation, that we have gone much too far to retreat; but what I dread is exposure, and this alarm I entertain not merely for my own sake, but that of every one implicated in the business. That meddling young man's escape from the agents of the French prefect — ' Here the queen interrupted Mrs. Owen, exclaiming, 'You are sure that the intelligence is correct?' 'Beyond all possibility of doubt,' replied Mrs. Owen, 'here is the letter which the prefect of police in Paris has written to the Marquis of Leveson acquainting him with all that is known of the rescue and escape.'

"Then as I still remained spellbound at the threshold of the boudoir, I could hear the rustling of a paper, as of a letter being opened, and then a pause ensued in the conversation, so that I felt assured the queen was reading the letter which Mrs. Owen appeared to have put into her hands. Wherefore did I not fly from that spot? Oh, cannot you comprehend the terrible nature of that curiosity which thus retained me there? And now I was shivering with a chill no longer, but trembling with a burning fever, for the blood was pouring like molten lead through my veins. Eagerly, intensely did I listen to catch the next words that might be uttered. At length the queen spoke again. She had evidently finished the perusal of the letter. 'Who could have been the authors of that rescue?' she said, in the quick, sharp, querulous tone which she adopts when labouring under apprehension or annoyance. 'You see,' she continued, 'it is quite clear from the report made by the police agents to the prefect, that the plot must have been deeply laid, and that they were Englishmen who accomplished the rescue. Who could they have been?' 'That is the mystery, and likewise the source of alarm,' observed Mrs. Owen. 'Certain it is that there are now several people who are acquainted with the whole plot which we have been conducting for years past; for of course the self-styled

Jocelyn Loftus did not fail to tell everything to his friends after his rescue, even if they did not know all particulars before.' 'Which was most probable,' added the queen, in a still more bitter tone of vexation, 'or else how could they have known he was a prisoner under such circumstances? And wherefore should they have attempted to rescue him? What can have become of him?' Mrs. Owen, in reply, proceeded to remind the queen that this young man whom they called Jocelyn Loftus was engaged to be married to a young lady named Louisa Stanley, residing at Canterbury; and it appears also, from what Mrs. Owen said, that her youngest daughter — Mary by name — is staying with that same Miss Stanley. 'I have allowed Mary,' observed Mrs. Owen, 'to remain there unmolested, because she is buried in a seclusion where she has no opportunity of revealing our secrets in a manner calculated to do us any more harm than she has already done.' Mrs. Owen likewise proceeded to observe that she hated her youngest daughter, and should never again be able to bear the sight of her, 'because she had proved so disobedient.'

"But heavens! my dear aunt," said the princess, "in what think you that this disobedience consisted?"

"I know not, my dear Charlotte," returned the Princess Sophia, who had listened with a profoundly mournful interest to the preceding narrative. "Pray continue; this is indeed a dreadful recital."

"Dreadful!" echoed the Princess Charlotte, hastily wiping the tears from her eyes and assuming a forced composure. "From the conversation which ensued between Mrs. Owen and the queen, I learned that for years past a fearful conspiracy had been in existence, a conspiracy — my God! for what object? Oh, to accomplish the ruin of my poor mother! In this conspiracy the queen, three or four noblemen, several titled ladies, and this Mrs. Owen have been leagued, and, what is worse, oh, ten thousand times worse, my father, the prince regent, is deep in that same conspiracy against his own wife. Ay, and more too — Alas! my dear aunt, that I should have to afflict you by these communications, but to you alone can I confide my sorrows, from you alone can I expect sympathy. I have named some of the conspirators, but in addition to the list I must specify my two uncles, the Dukes of —"

And here the voice of the young princess was lost in sobs as she murmured the two names.

"Oh, heavens! this is terrible, terrible!" exclaimed the Princess Sophia, clasping her hands.

"Now you can understand my sorrow, and you can sympathize with me," said the unhappy young Princess Charlotte. "That I should be compelled thus to speak to you concerning your own mother and your brothers — "

"Is scarcely so dreadful," interrupted the Princess Sophia, "as for you, my dear niece, to have learned so much evil of your own father. But pray proceed. Frightful as the narrative is, I am nevertheless impelled by a mournful interest to hear it all."

"I have already told you," resumed the Princess Charlotte, "that this conspiracy has been progressing for years. You are aware — of course you are — that in 1806 certain grave and serious charges were made against my poor mother. I was only ten years of age at the time, and was too young to know what was going on; but still I knew, even then, that my poor mother was unhappy, for when taken to see her at Blackheath, I noticed, child as I was, that she cried bitterly, very bitterly. You know, my dear aunt, that the charges made against her at the time of which I am speaking all fell to the ground; not one could be maintained. They were the basest fabrications, the vilest inventions of calumny. This I have of course learned only within the last few years, but it was reserved for this day's incident to reveal to me the astounding fact that those charges, made against my poor mother in 1806, resulted from the schemes of the conspirators whom I have named."

"Oh, surely you must be labouring under some terrible misapprehension!" exclaimed the Princess Sophia, contemplating her niece in dismay.

"No, all that I am telling you did I glean from the discourse which took place between the queen and Mrs. Owen this morning. But that is not all," exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, with another powerful and painful effort to subdue a passionate outburst of those feelings that were struggling to find a vent. "At this present moment Mrs. Owen's three eldest daughters are engaged in carrying out the schemes of the conspirators, and it is because the youngest daughter, Mary, recoiled in horror from the same de-

testable service when it was proposed to her, it is for this reason that she is hated by her mother, rendered homeless, and made dependent on the generosity of that Miss Louisa Stanley whose name I have already mentioned. Oh, you perceive, my dear aunt, that this morning has been fraught with terrible revelations for me. And can you wonder if I ere now expressed a doubt whether I would ever return to Windsor again, or whether I would not quit England, repair to Italy, and not only warn my beloved mother of the perils which surround her, but likewise remain with her henceforth to soothe and solace her? "

" No, you must not leave England, my dear niece," said the Princess Sophia. " Such a course could only lead to a scandal and an exposure that might involve the whole royal family in utter ruin. You have sought my advice, and you shall have it. You shall have my best assistance also, but believe me, the utmost caution and circumspection must be used. Tell me, however, whether anything further took place between Mrs. Owen and my mother this morning, and how their interview terminated."

" Mrs. Owen reminded her Majesty, as I just now said," resumed the Princess Charlotte, " of the circumstance that the young gentleman whom they spoke of as Jocelyn Loftus was engaged to be married to that Miss Louisa Stanley with whom Mary Owen is staying at Canterbury. Mrs. Owen therefore suggested that it was very probable Jocelyn Loftus, on his escape from the hands of the French authorities, would fly back to England and hasten to convince his beloved Louisa of his safety. That he would take this step instead of hurrying on to Italy, Mrs. Owen suggested as more than probable, and the queen appeared to fall into the same view of the matter. They therefore buoyed themselves up with this hope; and from some further remarks which they made, it seems as if they cared not if Jocelyn Loftus should content himself with merely writing a warning letter to my dear mother in Italy, inasmuch as my mother is so completely surrounded by the creatures and tools of the conspirators that the correspondence addressed to her is subjected to the most rigid scrutiny, and all letters calculated to open her eyes to the dangers of her position are carefully suppressed."

" I could not have believed my mother capable of such

wickedness," said the Princess Sophia, terribly afflicted and profoundly humiliated at being thus compelled to listen to the recital of a parent's iniquities.

" 'Tis, alas! all too true," observed the Princess Charlotte. " And, oh," she exclaimed, bursting into tears, " how shall I ever be able to meet my father again, otherwise than to overwhelm him with reproaches for his conduct toward my mother? For observe, my dear aunt," she cried, suddenly wiping away her tears, and evidently deriving solace from the thought which had just struck her and to which she was about to give utterance, " not once throughout that long conversation which I overheard this morning did either the queen or Mrs. Owen venture to impute a single crime to my poor mother. On the contrary, it is because the conspirators know her to be virtuous that they are compelled to invent imputations against her and suborn perjurers to weave the meshes of circumstantial evidence around her in order to consummate her ruin. The mere existence of this conspiracy, without even all the frightful details that have come to my knowledge, would be sufficient to prove my mother's innocence and virtue. Then wherefore is she thus persecuted? Why have I been for years separated from her? At first, when I was a child, I was told that it was not consistent with my rank as lineal heiress to the throne to be brought up under my parents' care, and knowing no better, but believing what I was told, I repined not. But as I grew up, misgivings relative to the truth of those representations entered my mind, and, as you are well aware, my dear aunt, I have for the last two or three years been much afflicted, much grieved, not only at being separated from both my parents, but also because they themselves are separated. You know," added the Princess Charlotte, with the fervid eloquence of feelings deeply moved, " that such have been my griefs."

" I know it, alas! too well," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, throwing her arms around the neck of her young and handsome niece. " I know it, my beloved Charlotte, for you have poured forth all your woes into my bosom, and I have done my best to console you."

" Yes, you have been a dear, fond relative to me," replied the royal niece, affectionately returning the aunt's caresses. " How often have you sustained my drooping spirit, and

how valuable have been your lessons in teaching me the necessity of assuming a demeanour calculated to prevent the giddy throng of rank and fashion from conjecturing now painful were the gnawings of affliction at my heart's core! But this is not the time and these are not the circumstances," she suddenly exclaimed, "for me to give way to grief. I must study how to act for the best, and you, my dear aunt, must counsel me."

"But you have not told me all that occurred in the queen's boudoir," remarked Sophia.

"Oh, these frequent interruptions which the gush of feeling occasions!" cried the Princess Charlotte. "The discourse between her Majesty and Mrs. Owen was long and serious, embracing so many points that it gave me the completest insight into the whole conspiracy. But they resolved upon nothing definite, unless it were to ascertain without delay whether the young gentleman whom they called Jocelyn Loftus be really at Canterbury or not. At length Mrs. Owen rose to depart, and I fled away from the vicinage of the boudoir. Hastening to my own apartments, I ordered the carriage, dressed myself in a hurry, and came direct from Windsor to St. James's to consult with you, my best friend and kindest relative."

"I have already urged the absolute necessity of prudence and caution," said the Princess Sophia. "Unfortunately, my dear Charlotte, the monarchical institutions of this country are becoming unpopular with the great mass of the people. The establishment of a republic in North America and the tremendous impulse given to liberal ideas by the French Revolution have set the millions a thinking in this country. The consequence is that royalty is menaced on every side; its end is approaching, and those who are anxious to precipitate the catastrophe rejoice in each new suicidal act which royalty itself commits. Every crime, every vice, every frailty, every misdeed connected with royalty that can be dragged forth by its enemies to the public eye, constitutes one of its suicidal acts and becomes a nail which it is knocking in its own coffin. It is not therefore for you, my dear Charlotte, to do aught to accelerate the ruin of that throne whereon you hope to sit, and hence the absolute necessity for caution — the utmost caution, indeed, under present circumstances."

" But something must be done! " cried the young princess, who had listened with the utmost impatience to her aunt's somewhat lengthened address. " I cannot suffer my poor mother to remain environed by these fearful perils. If I write to her a warning letter, it will be intercepted — "

" An idea has struck me," ejaculated the Princess Sophia. " It is evident that this Mr. Jocelyn Loftus is a generous-hearted, chivalrous young man, one who is resolved to become the champion of your mother against her enemies. Arguing from a knowledge of the human heart, it is indeed most probable that after his rescue from the French authorities he has sped back to England to embrace his beloved Louisa and personally assure her of his safety. I will at all events write this very day to Canterbury."

" You will write to Mr. Loftus? " exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, eagerly and thankfully.

" Yes, I will write to him," resumed the royal aunt. " I will beseech him to come up to London at once and hold a conference with me, a conference at which you, my dear niece, shall be present; and then we will settle some decisive plan for the protection of your dear mother against her enemies."

" Yes, this is the best course to pursue," exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, again flinging herself into Sophia's arms and embracing her affectionately. " Alas! alas! " she continued, the tears once more streaming down her cheeks, " sad, very sad, is my poor mother's destiny. You must know, my dear aunt, that although everybody observes such caution when speaking in my hearing, there are nevertheless times when I cannot help catching things which were never meant to reach me; and sometimes, too, I glean from newspapers such strange allegations and unmistakable allusions — "

" Concerning whom, my dear girl? " demanded the Princess Sophia, anxiously.

" Concerning my own father, the prince regent of the kingdom," was the response, delivered with so profound a melancholy that it was evident the young princess deeply felt the consciousness of her sire's profligacy. " I know many things which perhaps, at my age and in my position, I ought not to know," she continued. " I know, for instance, that during the long years which have elapsed since

my father's separation from my mother he has been leading a life which reflects no honour upon him as a parent, a husband, or a prince. I know that many and many a titled dame belonging to the royal court has been too intimate with him, and I know also that Lady Sackville is the present royal favourite at Carlton House, and that her will, if she choose to assert it, may not only become law there, but also throughout the British empire. Can I wonder, then, my dear aunt, to hear you tell me that royalty is suffering in the estimation of the people of this country? "

" Would to Heaven, my dear Charlotte," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, her own feelings now worked up to the most painful degree of excitement, for she felt — deeply, poignantly felt — that she herself was far from immaculate, and that the discovery of her dishonour had tended amongst other overwhelming misfortunes to render her own father, George III, a hopeless lunatic, " would to Heaven that such topics as those to which you have alluded had never been forced upon your thoughts! Oh, my dear niece, you are too young, too good, to have such reflections thrust, as it were, upon your innocent contemplation — "

" Reflections which destroy all the innocence of the soul," interrupted Charlotte, bitterly. " Where is the generous confidence of my youthfulness? It is gone, gone, and never can be restored. Often do I think of those apples which grow upon the banks of the Dead Sea, and which, though fair and beauteous to gaze upon, nevertheless contain nought but corruption and rottenness. May not the British court be likened unto one of those deceptive fruits? For, alas! my dear aunt, it is not concerning my father only that startling whispers have sometimes reached my ears and distressing allusions in the newspapers have met mine eyes, but there is scarcely a member of the royal family concerning whom I have not recently heard or read something calculated to shock or scare me."

" Good heavens! what mean you, dear girl? " demanded the Princess Sophia, surveying her niece with terrified amazement; for knowing how many dreadful things might be told relative to her parents, her brothers, her sisters, and even herself, Sophia was naturally stricken with horrible suspense as to how much of all those fearful truths had come to the knowledge of her niece.

" Oh, wherefore should I annoy and distress you, my dear aunt, more than I have already done? " exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, now evidently chagrined at having made her last observation.

" But you must tell me, my dear child, what you have heard or read," said the Princess Sophia, earnestly and even entreatingly, " because I will candidly tell you how much is true and how much is false of all that rumour circulates or that scandal loves to repeat."

" Yes, it is better that I should know how to discriminate between the true and false," said the young princess, evidently appreciating the justice of the remark. " Heaven knows that the royal history is already clouded enough without the necessity of wilful exaggeration. I have heard, then, my dear aunt," she continued, partially averting her blushing countenance, " that my deceased aunt, your well-beloved sister, the Princess Amelia, died heart-broken from a blighted and dishonouring love."

" No, no, it is not true, it is not true! " exclaimed the Princess Sophia, but her very manner convinced her niece that the tale was indeed too true. " What else have you heard, Charlotte? " demanded the aunt, abruptly.

" Dreadful things connected with my uncle Ernest, the Duke of Cumberland," responded the young princess, hesitatingly. " I overheard the other day the Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott conversing together about Uncle Ernest and his late valet, Sellis — "

" Oh, but this is the vilest of scandals! " exclaimed the Princess Sophia, starting as if galvanized. " Come, my dear girl, we must talk no more upon the subject, you must think no more of them."

" I will endeavour to forget them," rejoined the Princess Charlotte; but, having taken her leave of her aunt, she continued to ponder deeply and painfully upon all these matters during her ride back to Windsor Castle.

CHAPTER XXI

WESTMINSTER BRIDGE

It was the Wednesday fixed for the appointment with Daniel Coffin on Westminster Bridge, and shortly after dusk the prince regent, muffled closely in a capacious mantle, and with a hat the slouching brims of which completely shaded his countenance, issued from the private gate of Carlton Palace that opened into St. James's Park. Passing rapidly along the Mall, he at length relaxed his pace, and on arriving opposite St. James's Palace he walked very slowly, in the evident expectation of meeting some one. The evening was dull and misty, and very few people were in the park, but presently a figure, with an unmistakable gait, emerged, as it were, from the surrounding gloom, and accosted his Royal Highness.

"Ah! it is you," ejaculated the prince. "You are punctual; it is barely five o'clock."

"Why, your Royal Highness," observed the Hangman, "when I received such a pressing and, I may say, a peremptory message as your valet brought me to-day, it wasn't likely I should go and neglect it."

"Well, well," interrupted the prince, "you must talk as little and listen as patiently as you can, for I have something of the greatest importance to say to you. But before I proceed, let me tell you that if I know how to reward liberally I am equally aware how to punish severely, so that your fidelity shall be nobly recompensed, but any treachery on your part shall be ruthlessly punished."

"I don't at all object to such terms," remarked Coffin, "because I am too wise not to earn the reward, and I am not such a fool as to risk the punishment."

"I like deeds and not words," said the prince, "and if

I have given you this warning, it has not been without a reason. Wherefore did you go to Lady Ernestina Dysart and tell her that it was my intention to make her the bearer of the money to be paid to you this night? "

" Ah! " ejaculated the Hangman, " her ladyship told you that? But what else did she tell your Royal Highness? "

" She told me nothing," replied the prince, " but what I presume was the truth, namely, that you insinuated yourself into Leveson House, that you found your way to her private chamber, and that you made her a monstrous proposal which I dare not name."

" And was this all Lady Ernestina told you? " inquired the Hangman, the sardonic leer which he gave being visible even in the deepening gloom of the hour.

" Was not that enough? " exclaimed the prince, astonished at the question, " or would you have me understand that Lady Ernestina actually succumbed to your wishes? "

" No, I didn't mean anything of the sort," interrupted the Hangman, now satisfied that Ernestina had not mentioned to the prince a word relative to the other incidents which had occurred on the same night at Leveson House; not that he would have cared if she had been more communicative on the subject, but he was merely curious to ascertain the point.

" There is something peculiar in your manner," said the prince, " as if you fancied that Lady Ernestina revealed to me less than she might have done."

" Well," observed the Hangman, carelessly, " I only thought perhaps she might have told your Royal Highness that I got a few guineas out of her, and one or two little articles of jewelry that she gave me — "

" Of that no matter," interrupted the prince. " It is your disposition as well as your calling to lay your hand on whatever comes in your way. But to cut all this matter short, I merely mention the fact of Lady Ernestina's calling privately upon me and communicating the particulars of your visit to her in order to show you, by your own actions, that you cannot always keep a secret or behave prudently."

" Well, I admit I was wrong," observed the Hangman, affecting a contrite tone, " but as your Royal Highness had so positively said you meant to employ Lady Ernestina to bring the money to me at eleven o'clock to-night on West-

minster Bridge, I didn't think there was any harm in just mentioning the fact to her, and I certainly did not expect that she would peach to you again."

"Well, once more I say," ejaculated the prince, impetuously, "you must listen and not talk, and you must beware in future how you open your lips to breathe my name to a soul. I know your character well. Money is your god, gold is your idol, and you care not what you do or what happens as long as your avarice is gratified. Is it not so?"

"Your Royal Highness isn't far wrong," answered the Hangman, with a chuckle.

"I knew it," observed the prince, laconically. "And now, therefore, I am going this evening to tempt you with quantities of gold, — indeed, to line your pockets so effectually with the precious metal that, if I mistake not, you will be the happiest man in existence. In the first place, I give you at once the five hundred guineas which were to have been handed over to you to-night at eleven o'clock."

"Ah! then that appointment is not to be kept?" ejaculated Coffin, as he clutched the heavy bag of chinking gold which the prince gave him as he spoke.

"Listen and interrupt me not," continued his Royal Highness. "You have the five hundred guineas which I promised you. Now I wish to know whether you will earn another five hundred by performing the service I am about to specify?"

"I'd hang my own mother for such a sum, if she was alive," answered Coffin, eagerly.

"Then if you would so willingly dispose of your parent," exclaimed the prince, "you will have no objection to surrender up to the keeping of others a person who is now dwelling beneath your roof?"

"Who does your Royal Highness mean?" demanded Coffin.

"I mean the young man who passes by the name of the Foundling —"

"Ah! what, Jack? I thought from what I've lately heard that he belongs by rights to some great family. I was quite sure that Larry Sampson," continued the Hangman, "did not go up to Taggarty's to make inquiries for nothing."

"Who or what the lad is you will never know," resumed the prince, in a firm and decisive tone. "Be it sufficient

for me to say that his mother is a lady who has enlisted my sympathies in her case, and I purpose to provide for the young man in a foreign country. Now, will you part with him by fair means? "

" To be sure — for the consideration named just now," answered the Hangman, readily.

" But in order to earn that other five hundred guineas," resumed the prince, " you must do certain things to carry out the views which I entertain. In the first place, you must on some pretence or excuse cause the Foundling to be in the central recess on the left hand side of Westminster Bridge this night at eleven o'clock. In a word, he must keep the precise appointment which was originally made for you, and he must be left alone in that recess for at least a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes."

" What the deuce can this be for? " exclaimed the Hangman. " I should not like any harm to befall the boy."

" Harm — nonsense! " ejaculated the prince, " none is intended. But as circumstances compel me thus to confide in you, I have no objection to state, for your security and tranquillity, that the object of your boy's being left alone in the recess of the bridge this night for a brief period is to enable one who feels deeply interested in him to have an opportunity of gazing for once upon his countenance. Now do you understand me? "

" Perfectly, and it shall be done," replied the Hangman. " What next? "

" The moment you have left the Foundling in the recess," continued the regent, " you will hasten to the end of the bridge on the Westminster side, and there you will encounter me. I shall be dressed as you see me now, and then I will explain to you what further is required to be done."

" But I would rather know now," said the Hangman, naturally suspicious of treachery.

" Well," said the prince, after a brief pause, " I think it may be better to explain myself at once. When the Foundling has been a quarter of an hour in the recess of the bridge, you will have to fetch him away again and induce him to accompany you in a boat, on some pretence or another, as far as the receiving-ship which lies off the Tower Stairs. You will place him aboard that ship, and there leave him. These are all the details of the service which I require of

you, and for which the other five hundred guineas shall be placed in your hands when I meet you on the bridge to-night. And now, before you utter a word in reply to my proposals, let me tell you that if you do undertake this night's service you must beware of treachery. For were you to receive my gold and then keep the boy with you still, in the hope of making him the pretence and means of future exactions, I will find a way to wreak a deadly vengeance upon you. Therefore let us understand each other well."

"Your Royal Highness needn't fear. I will be staunch to the backbone," exclaimed the Hangman. "Of course I don't mind as long as I know the lad is to be properly dealt with."

"He shall be amply and honourably provided for in the Colonies," rejoined the prince. "It was at first my intention to have him taken from you without your knowledge, and to keep you in ignorance of what ultimately became of him, but, on maturer reflection, I resolved — seeing that he had lived with you so long — to deal frankly and candidly with you. I have now done so, and I offer you a large, a very large reward."

"And I sha'n't prove ungrateful for the kindness you have shown," said the Hangman.

"As a matter of course," observed the prince, a thought striking him, "you will not mention to the young man a single word beforehand. You will not in any way excite his suspicion relative to the proceedings that are this night to take place with regard to him."

"Trust me," exclaimed Coffin. "I shall know how to invent some excuse to make him stay in the recess of the bridge till I go back to fetch him again, and as for getting him in a boat down as far as the receiving-ship, that will be easy enough, for I have often taken him on queer expeditions the object of which he has never known till the time came. All that can be easily managed. The deuce of it is, what am I to say afterward to my young woman and her brother about his disappearance?"

"Say that he has run away," cried the prince, "or been killed in some scuffle."

"Well, I suppose I shall find an excuse," observed the Hangman. "Has your Royal Highness anything more to say?"

"Nothing," was the response, "only to warn you once again to beware of perfidy, and to bid you meet me punctually at the beginning of Westminster Bridge as the clock strikes eleven, the Foundling being at that hour in the recess agreed upon."

"All shall be right as the mail," responded the Hangman.

He and the prince then separated, the latter hastening across the Mall to St. James's Palace, and the former quitting the park at an equally speedy pace.

Astonished at all he had heard, devoured with curiosity to learn who the Foundling's parents really could be, revolving in his mind a thousand schemes to penetrate this mystery and turn it to subsequent advantage, Daniel Coffin sped toward Fleet Lane, and in the absorbing preoccupation of his thoughts he accomplished a considerable portion of the distance ere he remembered that he had enjoined Lady Ernestina to be sure and meet him that night at eleven o'clock. But then he reflected that the prince must have no doubt already told her, or would let her know during the evening, that he had changed his mind and required not her services to convey the five hundred guineas. Then, under these circumstances, would Ernestina repair to the bridge at all? The Hangman could not possibly conjecture, nor did he now choose to devote much attention to the subject. His desires in that quarter were, for the time being, all wrapped up in the more absorbing excitement of the business he had in hand and the money he had yet to earn.

Meantime the prince regent had entered St. James's Palace, and proceeded straight to the apartments of his sister the Princess Sophia. On obtaining an interview with her alone, he hastened to explain as much as he thought fit of what he had done in the matter now nearest her heart.

"Everything is arranged," he said, "in accordance with your desires. This night, at eleven o'clock, shall you have an opportunity of gazing for a few moments upon your son, and even of speaking to him a few words, if you will. But in this case you will, of course, address him as a stranger, and I warn you against suffering any transitory feeling of weakness to betray you into a revelation to that youth — "

"No, no, not for the world," interrupted the princess, "would I confess to him the secret of his birth! I shall not

trust myself to speak to him at all. I shall merely look upon him — But enough of this. What other arrangements have you made? "

" At half-past ten to-night I shall come to fetch you," resumed the prince, " and you will have to accompany me on foot to the place where I have arranged for the youth to be at eleven. As a matter of course I have been compelled to make a confidant of that dreadful man — I will not name him — with whom the boy has been living so long. After you have seen your son, that man will take him away in a boat to the receiving-ship lying off the Tower, the lieutenant in command of which has already received private instructions how to act. A vessel now lying at Gravesend and bound for Canada sets sail at three o'clock in the morning, by which hour there will be ample time to place the youth on board."

" And when he arrives in Canada? " asked the princess, impatiently.

" A good situation will be provided for him," replied the prince, " and ample opportunity afforded for his reformation and future welfare."

" Thank you, brother, for all this trouble, this forethought, this excellent arrangement," cried the princess, the tears trickling down her cheeks. Then, as a sudden thought flashed to her mind, she exclaimed, " But that dreadful man of whom you have made a confidant — "

" I shall take good care of him also," answered the prince, with a look of sinister meaning.

He then took a temporary leave of his royal sister, promising to return again at half-past ten o'clock, and in the meantime he went back to Carlton House to indulge in a luxurious banquet and a copious flow of wine. But in the middle of the festivity he received a whispered intimation from his faithful valet Germain that Lady Ernestina Dysart had called to see him upon most urgent business. Apologizing, therefore, to his guests at the dinner-table for leaving them for a few minutes, the prince repaired to the apartment to which Lady Ernestina had been shown.

" Pardon me for thus intruding upon you at such an hour," said her ladyship, raising the dark veil which had covered her features, " but you remember when I saw you the other day that you were to communicate with me again,

and I was fearful you might have forgotten that this is the night — "

" No, I had not forgotten it," interrupted the prince, taking the lady's hand and pressing it warmly. " But the truth is, my dear Ernestina, I have made some other arrangements. Indeed, on maturer reflection, I could not think of allowing you to perform so ignominious a part as to meet that ruffian for the purpose of giving him the money — "

" Ah! " ejaculated Ernestina, " then I presume you have entrusted some other messenger with the requisite amount? You are sure you have not neglected it? "

" Not for the world! " cried the prince, anxious to get back to the dinner-table. " Everything is arranged, and you have nothing to fear."

" A thousand thanks for this assurance! " exclaimed Ernestina. " And now farewell. I will not keep you another moment away from your guests."

The prince pressed his lips to Ernestina's, and they separated, his Royal Highness returning to the banquet which he had quitted so reluctantly, and his frail friend issuing forth again from Carlton House. But as, with her veil closely drawn down, she retraced her steps to Albemarle Street, Ernestina said to herself, " It is all right! My mortal enemy will be there, and opportunity will consequently still serve the resolve I have taken. 'Tis for me to anticipate the messenger whom the prince will send with the money. Yes, the path is clear enough. One bold deed, one energetic act, one tremendous crime, and I am safe! But, ah! better even that crime than live in constant terror of this dreadful man. And, after all, it can be no crime to rid oneself of a mortal enemy. It is merely striking a blow in self-defence."

Such were Ernestina's dreadful musings as she hurriedly retraced her way to Leveson House.

At half-past ten o'clock the prince regent, once more muffled up in his ample cloak and wearing the hat with the slouched brims, issued forth from Carlton House, entered St. James's Palace, and repaired to the apartments of the Princess Sophia. Almost immediately afterward, he came forth again, accompanied by his sister, who was likewise enveloped in a capacious mantle besides wearing a thick veil attached to her bonnet. Clinging to her brother's arm,

she sped nervously on by his side, her heart beating audibly and painfully. Little was spoken between them as they traversed the park in the most cautious manner with a view to avoid observation; but on this score they were comparatively safe, for the night was tempestuous, the wind had risen, the rain was falling, and few people were abroad. Even the occasional stragglers whom they met, when emerging into Great George Street, and afterward in Bridge Street, little suspected that the gentleman and lady whom they thus passed and who were muffled up in those ample cloaks were the prince regent and his royal sister.

When within about a dozen yards of the beginning of the bridge, the prince said, in a hurried voice, " You must now cross to the other side of the street, and keep your eyes fixed upon me. The lamplight is strong enough for that purpose. Watch until you see a man join me. Then, if I keep him in conversation, you may rest assured that it is the ruffian Coffin. In this case lose no time in hastening on to the recess which I have already explained to you, and where no doubt the youth will be seated. Fortunate is it for our enterprise that the night is so inclement. There are evidently but very few persons abroad, and the bridge seems comparatively deserted."

While making this last observation, the prince's straining eyes followed the curvature of the bridge as it was traced by the double row of lamps, and few indeed were the passenger forms that darkened the spaces of light produced by those lamps which were suspended over the massive stone recesses that have only within the last few years been removed from the bridge. In compliance with her brother's suggestions, the Princess Sophia quitted his arm, crossed the street, and from the opposite side attentively watched his movements. Eleven o'clock was proclaimed by the iron tongue of time sounding from Westminster Abbey, and while the metallic din of the last stroke was yet vibrating in the gusty night-wind, a man enveloped in coarse, rough garments stepped up to the prince.

" I'm Daniel Coffin," he said.

" All right!" responded his Royal Highness. " Is the lad there? "

" He is, and deucedly puzzled, too, to know what it can be all about."

"No matter, as long as he is there. You will have the kindness to remain here with me for a few minutes."

"To be sure," rejoined the Hangman. "Devilish good dodge on your part to prevent me going to see what sort of a lady it is that means to peep into the recess. But I don't mean to play your Royal Highness such a dirty trick."

"Hush! address me not by name!" whispered the prince, impatiently. Then, as he cast a look across the way, he beheld his sister hurrying on toward the recess. "Here, come a little farther into the shade, and take this bag. You found the contents of the other to be all right?"

"Nothing could be more accurate," answered Daniel Coffin, as he clutched this second bag which the prince placed in his hand.

We must now digress for a few moments to state that just before the prince regent and his royal sister made their appearance in Bridge Street, Lady Ernestina Dysart had passed rapidly that way and had at once entered upon the bridge. She was not now clad in her widow's weeds, but wore a garb evidently assumed for the purpose of disguise, and while one hand kept down the folds of a dark thick veil over her features, the other firmly clutched a naked dagger beneath her cloak. Could any human glance have penetrated through that veil, it would have seen her countenance ghastly pale, and her ashy white lips compressed with the stern resolve that swayed her soul and was reflected in the fixed look of her eloquent eyes. Her pace was rapid but determined. There was not the least irresolution in her mien, her gait, nor in her heart.

Continuing her way over the bridge, she flung a quick, searching look into the middle recess on the left hand side as she passed it by, but no one was there. She accordingly proceeded onward until she reached the extremity of the bridge on the Lambeth side, and there, just as she was about to turn back, she caught a sudden glimpse of the unmistakable features of the Hangman as he looked up for a moment and the light of the lamp fell upon his countenance. Ernestina did not give a second glance; that one was sufficient, and as she thus acquired the sudden certainty that her mortal enemy was upon the bridge, a flame appeared to diffuse itself throughout her entire being. Instead of

turning back at the instant, she walked a few yards farther on, saying to herself, " I will allow him time to reach the recess ere I retrace my way."

By not flinging a second glance upon the Hangman, but remaining satisfied with the one which had showed her he was there, she did not notice that some one accompanied him. With the fires of anticipated vengeance coursing through her veins, and clutching her dagger still more firmly than even at first, she turned back, retraced her steps, and just as she reached the middle recess, again caught sight of the Hangman, who was standing on the footway as if waiting for some one. But a passenger was advancing behind Ernestina at the moment, and therefore she herself passed rapidly on. In a minute, however, she stopped and allowed the individual to pass her by. Another person was now also coming from behind, and without looking toward him, she also allowed him to pass. Then suddenly turning back, just as the abbey clock began to strike eleven, she hastened to the recess.

At that moment a strong gust of wind swept over the bridge, making the flames flicker in the lamps in such a way that it seemed as if about to extinguish them. But by the uncertain glimmering Ernestina beheld the form of a man seated in the recess, and gliding in rapid as a ghost, she raised the dagger and drove it deep down into that individual's breast.

The attack was so sudden, and, as a matter of course, so unexpected, that Jack the Foundling — for he indeed the victim was — no sooner caught a glimpse of the weapon flashing before his eyes in the lamplight, than he was overpowered by the blow. A faint cry came from his lips as he fell back in the recess, but a louder and still more agonizing ejaculation burst from the tongue of the wretched Ernestina as the glimpse which she caught of the countenance suddenly upturned in mortal agony showed her that it was not the Hangman whom she had thus stricken, but a youth whom she had never seen before.

Those cries — that of the young man and that of the assassin lady — were drowned in the gust which was sweeping over the bridge, but, suddenly seized with a frenzied horror, Ernestina fled precipitately, leaving the dagger sticking in the breast of the unfortunate youth. Alas! had

she used a little more caution, this frightful misadventure would not have occurred, for she would perhaps have seen that the second individual whom she stopped to let pass, just before she flew back to the recess to deal the blow, was the very man for whom that blow was really intended.

We must now return to the Princess Sophia, whom we left watching at the commencement of the bridge. She saw through the gloom of night the dark form of a man accost her brother on the opposite side of the way. She lingered for a few moments to mark whether they remained together, and observing that they did so, she of course felt convinced that it was the public executioner. She therefore hastened along the bridge, and as she drew near the recess where she was to behold her son, such indescribable feelings seized upon her that she felt as if she had not courage to proceed, but must turn back abruptly. The next moment, however, she blamed herself for yielding to such sensations, and then, by a sudden revulsion of the heart's inscrutable emotions, she was seized with a fervid longing to gratify her curiosity and behold the offspring of her illicit love.

Inspired, therefore, with all the warmth of these maternal feelings, impelled by the parental yearnings that thus suddenly asserted their empire over her heart, the Princess Sophia sped onward and gained the recess. At that moment the wind was lulled, the lamp was burning steadily overhead, and its light was thrown full into the recess.

Heavens! what an appalling spectacle met the eyes of the princess! For there, within that nook of masonry, instead of her living son, whose animated countenance she expected to behold, a youth lay stretched upon the stone seat, his face ghastly and his eyes fixed like those of a corpse, and a dagger sticking deep in his breast.

A wild cry swept along the bridge, a cry which no gushing wind at that moment absorbed or drowned, but a cry whose rending anguish thrilled to each extremity, rebounding from bank to bank, and reaching the ears of the prince regent and the public executioner.

CHAPTER XXII

THE YOUNG PRINCESS

On the same evening and at about the same hour that the preceding scene took place on Westminster Bridge, the Princess Charlotte was passing through an ordeal of considerable mental excitement at Windsor Castle.

Retiring soon after ten o'clock to her own chamber, she dismissed her attendant ladies and sat down to pen a long letter to her mother. For it will be remembered that the Princess Sophia had, on the previous day, undertaken to write to Jocelyn Loftus and beseech him to pay an immediate visit to London, that she might hold a consultation with him relative to the conspiracy then on foot against the Princess of Wales. Now the young Princess Charlotte hoped, with the sanguine fervour that was natural to her age, not only that her aunt's letter would find Jocelyn at Canterbury, but that he would pay immediate attention to it by hurrying up to London, and that he would thence set off to Italy to warn the persecuted Princess Caroline of her danger. In this case Jocelyn might become the bearer of a letter from the young Princess Charlotte to her injured mother, — not a mere letter which she would be compelled to write guardedly and in such a manner as to exempt it from the chance of suppression, but a letter wherein she might give free vent to all the filial fondness that she experienced toward the being who gave her birth.

The composition of this letter occupied the princess upwards of an hour, and as she laid down her pen the timepiece on the mantel chimed eleven. The night was tempestuous, gusts of wind swept around the old towers of the palatial castle, and the rain was from time to time driven forcibly against the window-panes. The young princess

glanced around the spacious bedchamber in which she was seated, and as the thought slowly crept into her mind that many and many a horror, many a cruel deed, and many an atrocity had been perpetrated within the walls of Windsor Castle, she wondered whether that particular room had ever been the scene of bloodshed. As this idea stole into her brain, she shuddered with a deep involuntary tremor, and again did her glance sweep rapidly around the apartment. But although it was furnished in the most sumptuous manner, with gorgeous draperies drawn over the windows, golden-fringed hangings surrounding the gilt couch, the walls papered with a cheerful pattern and adorned with several splendid paintings, the cornices all elaborately carved and edged with gilding, the mantelpiece covered with ornaments, the magnificent mirrors reflecting the light of several wax tapers, and thus enhancing the lustre that flooded the room with its yellow glow, the toilet-table, the chiffoniers, and the chest of drawers all covered with elegant trifles and brilliant knicknacks, — in a word, although nothing could exceed the gay and gorgeous aspect of that apartment, yet did it this night seem in the eyes of the princess to be even more sombre and gloomy than any old tapestried chamber filled with mouldering furniture and moth-eaten hangings in the haunted castle of romance.

The truth is, the mind of the young princess was in that morbid state which made her view everything in a melancholy light, or, rather, through the ominous cloud that thus hung upon her soul. She was unhappy; for many, many reasons was she unhappy, not only on account of her mother, but because she felt that she belonged to a family almost every member of which was steeped to the lips in vices, immoralities, and treacheries, if not stained with downright crime. It seemed to her, then, as if she were sprung from a doomed race, a race whose infamies had rendered it accursed in the sight of Heaven, and whose punishment had to some extent, in the person of the lunatic king, commenced upon earth. No wonder that her mind became attenuated as thus she pondered, or that it should have thus been imbued with superstitious tendencies, so that when she looked around that sumptuously furnished room she beheld not the superb draperies and the brilliant ornaments, but fancied that there was blood upon the

walls, and that the stains of murder met her looks on every side.

Naturally of a strong and decisive character, the young princess endeavoured to cast off this superstitious feeling which was gaining upon her. But she could not. Recent experience, together with the dark, mysterious hints that in various ways and at different times met her ears, had made her aware that the royal personages of the present age were fully capable of abhorrent perfidies, base conspiracies, and most probably of flagrant crimes, and if such were the case at the beginning of the nineteenth century and in an age of civilization, of what horrors and of what atrocities might former royal families have been guilty, in earlier periods and in darker times? Oh, had not the walls of Windsor Castle been witnesses of scenes whereof no memory remained and no record was kept, save in the eternal registers of heaven's chancery? And was it not probable that every room, every chamber, every nook, and every corner of that castellated abode of England's kings had been the theatre of some remorseless deed or foul midnight murder?

These were the ideas that came trooping through the brain of the princess, producing upon her the same effect as if a procession of shrouded spectres passed before her view, and, unable to endure the awful nature of her thoughts, she rose from her seat and advanced toward the fireplace. But as her eyes fell upon the mirror above the mantel, it struck her that some horrible countenance was looking over her shoulder. A shriek rose to her very lips as she turned abruptly around with a strong recoil, but the scream died instantaneously away ere it found vent, for there was nought near her, nothing palpable to alarm her, and she saw that she was the prey of a fevered fancy. Terror, however, parched her tongue and made her throat feel as dry as if she had swallowed ashes, and advancing toward a table, she filled a glass with water and conveyed it to her lips. But at that moment a gust of wind swept with such violence against the window that the casement rattled as if some intruder were trying to force an entry, and the splendid draperies waved backward and forward with the draught as if some one were concealed behind and purposely shaking them.

The fears of the princess now arose to an intolerable height, and unable any longer to endure the solitude of her chamber, she was about to ring the bell to summon her ladies in waiting. But she suddenly recollected that as she had dismissed them for the night, they had separated to their own apartments, and that if they were recalled she would have to explain the reason for thus summoning them back to her presence, and her natural pride revolted from the idea of confessing that she was afraid to be left alone during so tempestuous a night. She accordingly endeavoured to conquer her fears. But she could not. There seemed to be a spell upon her mind, a mysterious gloom which she could not shake off. It was like an ominous foreboding, vague and unknown, but not the less oppressive and painful. Suddenly she bethought herself that the Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane's chamber was close at hand, and that this lady, having been somewhat indisposed, had kept her room all day. It therefore occurred to the young princess that she might repair to Mrs. Bredalbane's apartment for the ostensible reason of inquiring after her, but in reality for the sake of companionship, her Royal Highness hoping that half an hour's friendly discourse with this lady, whom she liked much, would perhaps cheer her mind, or, at all events, efface these superstitious terrors which at present forbade her from seeking her couch.

We may here observe that the Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane was one of the bedchamber women attached to the queen's household. She was a widow, about forty years of age, very affable and kind-hearted, but given to scandal and amazingly fond of gossiping. Her lodging at the castle was at the end of the same passage from which the Princess Charlotte's own suite of apartments opened, and which indeed communicated with the rooms of several of the court ladies.

Issuing forth from her chamber, the young princess threaded the passage, which was lighted with lamps suspended to the ceiling, and she reached the extremity of the carpeted corridor without encountering a soul. The door which she now gently opened led into a little antechamber, beyond which was Mrs. Bredalbane's own room, and as the princess approached the door of the latter, she heard voices speaking within. Suddenly reminded that

she would perhaps be intruding, she was about to retire at once, when a word, a name, which suddenly smote her ear, transfixed her to the spot and all in a moment inspired her with the keenest curiosity and the acutest interest.

That name was Sellis.

There were candles burning upon the table in the antechamber. A velvet curtain hung in the doorway between the two rooms, and the door itself was now ajar. The reader may therefore understand how it was that the presence of the princess was not observed by those who were in the bedchamber, and how she was thus enabled to become an unseen listener to the conversation that was going on and in which her interest had been excited in so sudden and so lively a manner. The voice which she had heard mention the name of Sellis was that of the Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane, and she speedily discovered that the friend with whom Mrs. Bredalbane was thus familiarly conversing was Lady Prescott, also one of the royal bedchamber women. On a former occasion the Princess Charlotte had heard these two ladies in confidential discourse together, and her ears had then caught enough to make her long to know more. Now therefore that the opportunity so unexpectedly but so favourably presented itself, she could not resist the temptation. Forgetting all her recent terrors, and too much swayed by intense curiosity to reflect for a moment that she was acting wrong thus to play the eavesdropper, the young princess was so completely transfixed at the mention of the name of Sellis that she could not possibly avoid remaining where she had thus suddenly stopped short, and losing sight of every other subject that a moment before had been uppermost in her mind, she gave all her attention to the discourse that was taking place in the inner chamber.

"You seem, my dear Mrs. Bredalbane," said Lady Prescott, "to be somewhat bitter against the Duke of Cumberland. Surely you have imbibed no unjust prejudice toward that prince?"

"Prejudice, my dear friend!" exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane. "I am really surprised that you should deem me capable of such a failing. It is perfectly true that I do not like the duke, and that he never was any favourite of mine, but although I may have my aversions and my antipathies, I

should scorn to invent any evil reports, or exaggerate those already in circulation, to serve a vindictive purpose."

"Oh, I know you too well," cried Lady Prescott, "to need such assurances from your lips, and if I spoke of prejudice, I was assuredly wrong. I am aware, my dear friend, that you are better acquainted than any other lady of the court with the secrets and mysteries of the royal family."

"Yes," observed Mrs. Bredalbane, in a sort of musing tone, "I could tell some strange tales if I chose. But there are certain things with which I am acquainted, and which will never pass my lips."

"When I asked you just now," said Lady Prescott, "to give me all the details relative to the affair of Sellis and the Duke of Cumberland, I did not wish to intrude upon any secret or special knowledge that you may possess concerning that lamentable tragedy. I merely thought that as I was not in London at the time, but buried in that Welsh solitude to which Sir John Prescott took me for my health, as you must remember — "

"Yes, I recollect that you were absent at the time, and when I sent you the newspapers containing the proceedings, I remember," continued Mrs. Bredalbane, "that your husband wrote to beg I would desist from forwarding the journals, as you were in such a nervous state through ill-health that any excitement was most prejudicial."

"And therefore, you perceive, my dear friend," said Lady Prescott, "that I am ignorant of most of the details connected with that dreadful affair. When I returned to court after my Welsh rustication, the death of the Princess Amelia had become the all-absorbing topic of mournful interest, and no one ever breathed a word relative to the Sellis tragedy. It had, therefore, well-nigh fled from my memory until you so singularly and pointedly alluded to it the other day. I then asked you to give me the full narrative, and you were about to comply with my request when something interrupted the discourse."

"I recollect," said Mrs. Bredalbane. "It was during the card-party the other night, and I thought that as we were seated in the window recess, the Princess Charlotte was listening to what we said. That is the reason I broke off the topic so suddenly."

"And now, therefore," continued Lady Prescott, "that we are all alone together, and free from interruption, indeed without a chance of anybody intruding upon us, I hope you will gratify my curiosity."

"I have no objection," replied Mrs. Bredalbane. Then, after a pause, she commenced her narrative in a low and measured tone, as if she were not only impressed with the solemn seriousness of the subject, but also afraid that the very walls themselves had ears.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SELLIS TRAGEDY

"You are aware that the Duke of Cumberland, at the time of which I am about to speak, occupied the same suite of apartments where he now resides, in the Kitchen Court of St. James's Palace. You will also recollect that it was upwards of four years ago, in the summer of 1810, when the fearful tragedy occurred. At that time the three principal valets of his Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland were Sellis, Neale, and Joux, and they took turns, week by week, in doing duty. Joseph Sellis was an Italian, short in stature but well made, with an olive complexion, and tolerably good-looking. He was married, and had four children. His habits were exceedingly domesticated and regular. He was a good, steady man, a kind husband and an excellent father. Indeed, he was perfectly uxorious in his attentions toward his wife, who was a somewhat handsome woman, and so fond was he of his children that if either of them experienced the slightest ailment, he became overwhelmed with grief and a prey to the most excruciating apprehensions. His wife was an exemplary woman, and altogether it would be impossible to conceive a happier family than that of Sellis. In disposition he was mild, inoffensive, and obliging. Thoroughly humane, he seemed incapable of harming a soul, but, on the contrary, was ever ready to perform a generous deed or render a service.

"In fact, he was liked not only by the Duke of Cumberland, but by the royal family in general, all the princes and princesses noticing him and expressing a constant interest in his welfare. They, moreover, made him numerous presents, and never seemed wearied of heaping favours upon him. To such an extent was he thus esteemed, or indeed caressed,

by royalty, that the duke and one of his sisters — the Princess Augusta it was — stood sponsors for Sellis's youngest child. Moreover, though all the servants of the duke's household were on board wages, and the valets were not regularly lodged in St. James's, — the one on duty for the week alone being expected to sleep there, as a general rule, — Sellis and his family were nevertheless accommodated with rooms over the gateway leading into the Kitchen Court from Cleveland Row. These rooms communicated by means of a passage with the duke's suite of apartments, and sometimes the princesses, when on a visit to their brother's rooms, would pass into Sellis's lodgings and fondle his children. In addition to his wages, which were handsome, he had various perquisites such as were enjoyed by no other dependent in the duke's household; and thus in every way was Sellis a favourite, and all circumstances combined to render him a happy man."

"And was he perfectly sane?" inquired Lady Prescott, — "in the full and complete enjoyment of his reason?"

"Undoubtedly," exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane. "Quiet but cheerful, unobtrusive in manner, though of a gay disposition, and so temperate that he never tasted spirits, disliked wine, and habitually drank water, Sellis was never a prey to any unnatural excitement. In fact, he was just one of those persons who seem fitted by nature to pass tranquilly and serenely through life, experiencing as little of its agitation and turmoil as can possibly fall to the lot of mortals. Thrifty and economical, abstemious and regular in his mode of life, he was not only free from pecuniary embarrassment, but had accumulated some little savings from his wages, which the presents he had received from the royal family had materially increased."

"Then he was altogether a good and excellent man?" said Lady Prescott.

"An excellent man!" cried Mrs. Bredalbane, with marked emphasis. "But having now concluded my prefatory remarks, I shall enter upon the recital of that most dread tragedy which has made the name of Sellis known throughout the world. It was, then, in the forenoon of the 31st of May, 1810, that Sellis was walking with his wife in St. James's Park. His mood was gay and cheerful as usual, and the discourse chiefly turned upon the preparations which

he wished his wife to make for a little party that he proposed to give in the course of the ensuing week to celebrate the birthday of one of his children. Mrs. Sellis promised compliance with all her husband's suggestions, and at two o'clock they reëntered their lodgings. Dinner was served up, and Sellis ate with his usual appetite. But scarcely was the meal over when one of the children was taken ill with indigestion. The surgeon was sent for, and although there was no positive danger, yet such was the anxiety of Sellis that he requested his wife to let the child remain with her that night, observing that he would sleep in his own room in the duke's suite of apartments. Mrs. Sellis consented, and in the evening, between six and seven o'clock, Sellis repaired to the room alluded to, to see that it was in proper order for him to pass the night there; because, I should observe, it was not Sellis's week for being on duty about the person of his royal master, — it was Neale's turn, — and thus Sellis was not supposed to be occupying his room in the ducal apartments, but to be sleeping (as was his wont when off duty) in his own lodgings. I may further add that the chamber of which I am speaking, and which must be called Sellis's room, was at the end of a passage communicating with the duke's private apartment, and that adjoining this apartment, indeed, separated from it by only a thin partition of wainscot, was Neale's room. Be kind enough to keep these particulars in your memory — "

"I shall not lose sight of them," observed Lady Prescott. "Pray proceed, my dear friend. I am dying with curiosity."

"I am now approaching the blood-stained chapter of this narrative," said Mrs. Bredalbane. "It appears that Sellis, having assured himself that his room was in order, and that the housemaid had not omitted to set it to rights since he last slept there, was about to return to his wife, when he bethought himself of something that he wished to say to Neale. He accordingly repaired to Neale's room, and with the familiarity usually subsisting between the fellow members of the same household, he opened the door without knocking. But suddenly starting back in dismay, he exclaimed, 'Heavens! the Princess Augusta!' and fled along the passage. But in his precipitate flight he ran against Joux, the duke's third valet, who was advancing up the passage at the moment, and who had heard that ejaculation

which burst from his lips. On observing Joux, Sellis instantaneously endeavoured to assume an air of composure, and he began to apologize for his awkwardness in running against him. But Joux saw plainly enough that something had transpired not only to disconcert his fellow page, but to agitate him profoundly. Nevertheless, as Sellis did not volunteer any explanation, but, on the contrary, sought to veil his excited feelings as much as possible, Joux did not think it right to question him upon the subject. In the midst of the apologies that Sellis was making for his awkwardness, he suddenly broke off to inquire whither Joux was going. 'To speak to Neale,' was the response. 'No, you cannot see him; he is engaged,' exclaimed Sellis, with a strange wildness of look and a most unaccountable abruptness of tone. 'Come along with me,' and clutching Joux by the arm, he led him into his lodgings. There he became more composed, or else put on a forced composure, and taking wine and brandy from the cupboard, he invited Joux to help himself. The invalid child was asleep at the time, and Mrs. Sellis joined her husband and Joux in the parlour. Sellis mixed her a little brandy and water, Joux took some liquor also, but Sellis himself abstained entirely, as was his habit. Joux remained there for about an hour, during which interval Sellis seemed to recover his wonted cheerfulness and self-possession, or if not, he at all events concealed his emotions so successfully that his wife failed to observe anything peculiar about him, beyond the anxiety which he expressed on account of his child.

"Presently the surgeon returned, and pronounced the little invalid to be better, assuring Sellis that there was not the slightest danger. Joux then took his departure, wondering what could possibly have been the cause of that extraordinary excitement which he had witnessed, and of that singular ejaculation which had burst from the lips of Sellis, when rushing so precipitately along the passage. It was now past eight o'clock in the evening, and Sellis remained with his wife until ten. During this interval he was engaged in reading, and Mrs. Sellis did not observe anything peculiar in his manner. Embracing her and the children with his wonted affection, and observing that he should be up early to ascertain how the invalid little one had passed the night, he withdrew to his own room."

"And this was at ten on the memorable night?" said Lady Prescott, inquiringly.

"Yes," responded Mrs. Bredalbane. "The Duke of Cumberland, who had gone to a concert, returned soon after midnight and retired to his own apartment, where Neale was in attendance. Then all was quiet in the palace for a couple of hours. But at about half-past two o'clock in the morning the hall porter was alarmed by a cry of 'Murder!' and starting up, he beheld the Duke of Cumberland in his nightshirt, which was covered with blood. Neale was with him, and Mrs. Neale, who slept by herself in another part of the premises, was instantaneously fetched. The alarm spread through the palace, and while one footman ran to summon the duke's medical attendants, another went to call in the guard. The duke, leaning upon Neale's arm, returned to his apartment, whither Joux, who had been roused by the alarm, speedily repaired. An inquiry was then made for Sellis. 'Go and tell him that his Royal Highness has been well-nigh murdered,' said Neale. Joux accordingly sped along the passage toward Sellis's room, and on his way he was joined by Mrs. Neale and the porter. On opening the door, an appalling spectacle presented itself to their view. Sellis was lying dead upon the couch, his throat cut in so horrible a manner that his head was nearly severed from his body. A razor, covered with blood, was lying upon the floor. The body was completely dressed, save and except the cravat, coat, and shoes. It seemed as if the unfortunate man had thrown himself on the bed as one does when overexhausted or else when not feeling any inclination to retire to rest altogether, and that sleep had stolen upon him, — that sleep whence he was never to awake. The wash-basin was half-full of water stained with blood, and on the edge of the basin were the marks of bloody fingers plainly visible. The cravat was upon the toilet-table, the coat folded up and placed on a chair; the deceased's watch was in the pocket at the bed's head. That Sellis had been murdered was the conviction which instantaneously struck Joux. The first glance which he threw upon the appalling scene showed him that this was no case of suicide, but a foul assassination."

"Heavens!" ejaculated Lady Prescott, in a tone of horror. "Poor creature! Unfortunate man!"

"I must now observe," resumed Mrs. Bredalbane, "that the hall porter and Mrs. Neale did not advance into the room at all, but the former remained for a few moments transfixed with horror upon the threshold, while the latter fled to raise the alarm that Sellis had committed suicide. Such was no doubt the impression made at the instant upon the woman's mind. The hall porter, on regaining his self-possession, hurried away likewise to spread the same rumour, and Joux was left alone in the room where the fearful tragedy had taken place. Advancing nearer toward the couch, he observed a sheet of paper lying upon the floor. He picked it up. It was a half-finished letter in the handwriting of Sellis, and as Joux hastily ran his eyes over the first few lines, a tremendous secret was suddenly revealed to him. He understood it all. The excitement of Sellis and the ejaculation which had burst from his lips in the passage, yes, even this murder itself, all was explained. But footsteps were approaching, and Joux thrust the letter into his pocket. The next moment a sergeant and file of men, who had been fetched from the guard-house, made their appearance at the room door. The sergeant's name was Creighton, and entering the chamber of death, he gazed in horror upon the scene. As he turned away, he observed the razor upon the floor, and picking it up, placed it upon the table. He then went out, followed by Joux, and the room was locked up. The guard retired, and Joux, hastening to the duke's room, found that Sir Henry Halford and Mr. Home, the eminent medical practitioners, had arrived and were dressing his Royal Highness's wounds, which they pronounced to be severe, but not mortal. Joux heard the account which the duke gave of the affair, and then hastened to shut himself up in his own room, to read the letter of which he had as yet only caught a glimpse of the few first lines. What his feelings were while perusing that letter, what his reflections were after he had read it, I shall not pause to explain now. You shall have an opportunity of judging presently, when I show you the letter itself."

"The letter itself!" cried Lady Prescott, with a perfect thrill of astonishment in her accents.

"Yes, the letter itself," repeated Mrs. Bredalbane, in a positive tone. "You are not perhaps aware that Joux entered my service soon after the tragedy, and remained

with me for upwards of a year. He told me everything, he gave me the letter — But I am anticipating — "

"Yes, pray proceed in due course, my dear friend," said Lady Prescott, "although I am on the tenter-hooks of curiosity."

"You may conceive," resumed the Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane, "the amazement, the horror, and the consternation which seized upon the startled metropolis when the morning papers of June 1st announced that 'the Duke of Cumberland had been surprised while asleep by an attempted assassination, made by one of his valets named Sellis, and who had put a period to his own existence.' A thousand rumours were instantaneously in circulation, and in many quarters the story of the suicide was utterly disbelieved, the valet was declared to have been murdered, and the darkest hints were thrown out. A jury was summoned in the afternoon of the 1st of June to investigate the matter. But you may conceive the astonishment of the jury when the coroner began by informing them 'that a long examination of the principal witnesses had already been gone into, and that of course it would only now be necessary to have the depositions then taken read before them (the jury) to the witnesses!' All the depositions which had been previously and privately taken were therefore now read. The first was that of the Duke of Cumberland. His Royal Highness deposed that he was awakened from a profound sleep by the sensation of some blows being dealt upon his forehead, and at first he thought there was a bat in the room flying over his head. But by the light of the wax taper he beheld the form of a man, and springing from his couch, he grappled with him, wrenching away the sword which had been the weapon of attack. He then saw the assassin escape, but without perceiving who he was, and raising his voice, he summoned Neale, who slept in the adjoining room. Neale instantaneously hurried to his royal matter, and then they went to the hall together to give the alarm in the manner I have already described. On returning to the duke's chamber, they instituted a search in a closet opening therefrom, and in that closet they found a pair of Sellis's slippers. From this circumstance it was inferred that Sellis was the assassin, that he had concealed himself in the closet previously to the duke retiring for the night, and that, failing

in his attempt at murder, he had fled to his own room and committed suicide. Neale's deposition confirmed that of the duke in every detail, and Neale gratuitously added his opinion that Sellis was a morose, bad-tempered, discontented person. I will here observe that every other person belonging to the ducal household who was examined deposed to the very reverse in respect to Sellis's character and disposition, and described him as civil, inoffensive, kind-hearted, and good-tempered. The weapon with which the duke had been attacked was his own regimental sword, which had been left lying about in his room for some days. The walls between his Royal Highness's chamber and the hall were covered with bloodstains, caused by the duke's hands when he went to alarm the porter. The medical evidence proved that his Royal Highness's wounds were most severe, that one of his fingers was nearly severed, and that his head was so much hurt that the arteries of the brain were laid bare. Having listened to the reading of the principal depositions, the jury went to view the corpse of Sellis. The room had been left just as it was when the tragedy was first discovered. The newspapers described the body as ' lying on a bed of matted blood, livid and loathsome, with a horrid gash from ear to ear; and over all the features the distortion of pain was visible, apparently struggling with the ghastly composure of death.' The back of the head lay against the deceased's watch, and the basin, with the blood-dyed water and the finger-marks, was still there. On returning to the room where the inquest was held, the jury heard the evidence of the surgeons who had examined the corpse. They deposed that the windpipe was cut completely through, and that the wound was six inches in length and an inch and a half in diameter. The unhappy widow of the deceased deposed to the effect that her husband was steady, abstemious, and affectionate to herself and children, that he was in no pecuniary embarrassment, and that he had never shown the slightest symptom of mental aberration. The jury returned a verdict of *felo de se*. The corpse was put into a hearse at dead of night, and hurried to Scotland Yard, where it was buried in a hole with a stake driven through it. Thus terminated this melancholy affair, so far as the public is acquainted with the particulars, and of course Sellis has been branded as

a cowardly assassin, a midnight murderer, a miserable suicide."

"But Joux, the French valet?" exclaimed Lady Prescott. "Wherefore was he not examined at the inquest, and why was not the letter produced?"

"Ah! those are the particulars on which I am now going to enter," observed the Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane. "The epistle, the half-finished epistle, penned by poor Sellis, is in that writing-desk, and I will show it to you. First, however, let me explain —"

But at this moment an ejaculation of mingled amazement and terror struck upon the startled ears of Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE QUEEN

The reader will be kind enough to remember that while Mrs. Bredalbane was reciting her narrative of awful interest to Lady Prescott, the Princess Charlotte was enchained, a spellbound listener, in the antechamber. But at the moment when Mrs. Bredalbane seemed about to enter upon the most thrilling portion of her history, the outer door of that antechamber opened suddenly, and the Princess Charlotte, turning abruptly around, gave vent to an ejaculation of mingled amazement and alarm on beholding the prim, starch figure of the queen.

This was the ejaculation that reached the ears of the Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott, and springing from their seats by the cheerful fire that was blazing in the inner room, they rushed to the doorway, flung aside the curtain, and, to their indescribable wonderment, beheld the Princess Charlotte on one side of the antechamber and her Majesty the Queen on the other. Instantaneously struck with the conviction that their conversation had been overheard by one or the other of the royal ladies, if not by both, Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott exchanged looks of uneasiness and vexation.

"What are you doing here, at this time of night?" demanded the queen, bending a harsh and severe look upon the young princess.

"I — I — came — that is," stammered the youthful Charlotte, utterly at a loss what response to give or what excuse to make, "I came to — to — "

"Methinks, to say the least of it," said the queen, bridling up, "it is particularly indiscreet for a young princess, the daughter of England's regent, the granddaughter of Eng-

land's crowned sovereigns, to be thus absent from her own apartments at midnight."

"Madam," exclaimed the young princess, the haughty blood flushing her cheeks and turning the marble of her brow into glowing crimson, "be pleased to recollect the motto upon the royal arms and apply it to yourself: 'Evil be to him (or her) who evil thinks.'"

"Granddaughter, this is an impertinence on your part," said the queen, darting the savage glance of a tiger-cat upon the princess. Then, in a colder tone, she observed, but still with sneering accents, "I must, however, admit the justice of hearing your defence before I condemn. Therefore, perhaps you will have the kindness to explain wherefore you are here, listening so attentively as you were, like any eavesdropper, at the moment I entered the chamber."

"Ah! madam, you are determined to humiliate me!" exclaimed the princess, bursting into tears, for this was the first time she had ever been so harshly and cruelly treated by the queen.

As for Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott, they instantaneously comprehended from her Majesty's words that the young princess had been listening to their discourse, and well knowing that if she were to repeat to the queen all that had been said they would receive a prompt command to quit the castle, bag and baggage, they threw earnestly imploring looks upon her Royal Highness. The princess at once catching the meaning of those glances and penetrating the ladies' fears, suddenly wiped her eyes and flung a look of reassurance upon them. Then, putting on an air of dignified composure, she said, "I must confess I did listen at this doorway for a few moments, but it was only to ascertain who was within, inasmuch as the fantasy had seized me to come and pass half an hour with Mrs. Bredalbane, intelligence having reached me that she was somewhat indisposed."

"Permit me, then, to observe," said the queen, with a prim, starch aspect and a considerable acerbity of tone, "that it is altogether contrary to court etiquette, as well as being a breach of maiden propriety, to wander from one room to another between eleven and twelve o'clock at night. But come, granddaughter; I wish to speak to you."

"Good night, ladies," said the princess, casting upon the

two bedchamber women a look to assure them that the secret of their conversation on so ticklish a topic was safe with her, and she then followed the queen away from the apartment.

"I have been seeking you in your own chamber, Charlotte," said her Majesty, "because I wished to have some conversation with you. Indeed, I was informed that you had dismissed your ladies for the night at an earlier hour than usual, but that you had not retired to rest, and this intelligence, added to your altered looks during the day, determined me to demand an explanation at your hands."

Thus spoke the queen, as she led the way along the passage toward her royal granddaughter's room. But just as they reached the threshold and the princess caught a glimpse of the writing materials on the table, the recollection instantaneously flashed to her that she had left the letter to her mother lying upon the table. The queen, then, had perhaps read it? Yes, there was little doubt that such was the case, and hence that bitterness of tone and manner which her Majesty had shown toward her for the first time.

"Not finding you ere now," said the queen, as she advanced into the room, while the princess followed, closing the door behind her, "I took the liberty of ascertaining what had been the nature of your most recent studies, and if I were therein guilty of an undue amount of curiosity, at all events it was not more reprehensible than that which you have just now shown in listening to the conversation of my bedchamber women."

The vein of sarcasm which began to penetrate through this speech from its commencement increased in bitterness as her Majesty went on speaking, and as she gave utterance to the concluding words, her eyes settled upon the letter that lay on the table.

"I understand your Majesty," said the young princess, her indignation suddenly aroused to a degree that armed her with a more than feminine courage. "You have been reading the letter which I inadvertently left here?"

"Yes, I have read every word of it," responded the queen, in a cold tone of defiance. "I have read how you dare accuse your own father, your uncles, myself, and several of the proudest nobles and most virtuous ladies in the country of being engaged in a conspiracy — "

"It is true, madam, it is true!" exclaimed the young princess, looking grandly handsome at that moment in the flush and the glow of her great indignation. "Even while compelled to admit that this eavesdropping of to-night is not the first instance of the kind of which I have been guilty, I at once and unhesitatingly proclaim to your face that from your own lips have I heard the avowal of a conspiracy's existence."

"You dare?" ejaculated the queen, turning very pale, and with a strange quivering of the lips, for she knew not what to think.

"Yes, I dare, madam," exclaimed the princess, "I dare accuse you thus boldly; and I dare also aver that I listened and overheard every syllable that took place between your Majesty and Mrs. Owen yesterday. Hence that alteration in my looks which you have observed — "

"Ah! then denial will be useless," muttered the queen, between her false teeth, and drawing forth a snuff-box from her bag, she took a huge pinch of the stimulating powder. Then, as if it had inspired her with the insolent spirit of one who boldly throws off the mask when it becomes impossible to wear it any longer, she said, "You and I had better understand each other at once, Charlotte. In that letter," — and she pointed to the one upon the table, — "you inform your mother that you have accidentally discovered the atrocious conspiracy which exists to ruin her, but that through the kindness of your aunt Sophia you expect to secure the services of a young gentleman whom you do not know otherwise than by name, in order to help your mother to frustrate the designs of her enemies; and this letter you propose to transmit by your new friend, Mr. Jocelyn Loftus, provided you can in reality secure him as the champion of this cause. Now if, after reading that letter, I searched for you in all the adjacent rooms until I found you in Mrs. Bredalbane's antechamber, it was for the express purpose of letting you know at once that there is but one will in England at this moment which shall be paramount, and that is my will. You are not queen yet, and unless you yield implicitly to my advice, you never shall be. Your own father would help to disinherit you in favour of one of his brothers, if you were to thwart his purposes. As for Sophia — the foolish minx! — how dares

she interfere in these matters? As if she herself were so very immaculate!" and the words came hissing from the queen's mouth.

"What! would you asperse the character of your own daughter?" exclaimed the young Princess Charlotte, darting a look of mingled amazement and scorn upon her grandmother.

"I only meant to say," observed the queen, hurriedly, for she now repented of the remark which she had let slip in her rage, "I only meant to say that Sophia has her faults as well as the rest of the world. But let us not bandy unnecessary words. As for your letter, this is the way I serve it," and seizing hold of the epistle, she crumpled it up and tossed it into the fire.

"Then am I debarred the privilege of writing to my own mother?" asked the princess, her countenance now becoming deadly pale and her lips quivering with indignation.

"You may write as much as you choose," responded the queen, "so long as you mention nought contrary to my views. An opposite course can only have the tendency of producing the suppression of your letters."

"Ah! then an English princess is a slave," cried Charlotte, with flashing eyes, dilating nostrils, and swelling bust.

"Yes, a slave to the will that is paramount," replied the queen, with the look of malignant triumph.

"But I would sooner be a beggar in the streets and enjoy freedom of action," exclaimed the outraged Charlotte, "than continue a princess to be thus held in bondage."

"We are not upon the stage of a theatre," said her Majesty, "and again I may remind you that you have not yet the opportunity of playing the tragedy-queen in all its reality. A truce, therefore, to these magnificent expressions and lofty complainings on your part. If you are disobedient, I shall know how to punish you, all princess and lineal heiress to the throne though you may be. For the present, if your life becomes one of prisonage and espionage, you have only yourself to thank for it. No more journeys to London, unless accompanied by me. Your rides, too, will be confined to the environs of Windsor, and if you order your coachman to proceed elsewhere, you will only subject yourself to the pain of refusal. As for this silly affair of enlisting Mr. Jocelyn Loftus in your projects," added the queen, with a sneer,

" depend upon it I shall find means to put a stop to any such ridiculous proceeding, and when you next meet your aunt Sophia, the best thing you can do will be to remain silent on the subject. Now you understand me, and I wish you good night."

The young princess made no reply, but turned away with swelling heart, and as the door closed behind her grandmother, she threw herself into an armchair and burst into an agony of tears.

" This, this indeed is slavery! " she murmured to herself. " I am as much enchained as any one of those poor and oppressed millions who are compelled to obey the despot rule of royal sway. The only difference between us is that their chains are of iron undisguised, while mine are gilt. Oh, my poor mother, am I indeed separated from thee by an impassable gulf? May I not warn thee of the perils which the machinations of thine enemies are conjuring up around thee? Am I indeed a prisoner within these walls? But who will dare make me so? "

And rising from her seat with a sudden assumption of that dignified energy which so well became her, the princess advanced toward the door. To her surprise, the handle yielded to her touch, for she almost expected to find it locked. Then she paused, mistrustful, as it were, of being left thus far free, for she fancied either that the queen was watching at the end of the passage, or that she had set spies upon her. But again recovering all her presence of mind, she issued forth from her room and proceeded along the passage, but without any definite aim.

Suddenly a thought struck her, and obeying the impulse of the idea, she knocked at the door of Mrs. Bredalbane's antechamber. The summons was almost immediately answered by Lady Prescott, who had not yet retired for the night, but was still keeping her invalid friend company. And here we may observe that her ladyship was a young widow, six and twenty years of age, and exceedingly good-looking. Her beauty was of an Oriental cast, her complexion was dark, her eyes were very fine, and her teeth were like ivory. As for her eyes, she now opened them wide with astonishment on beholding the Princess Charlotte returning thither after the taunts and reproaches she had received from the queen.

"I wish to speak to you particularly," said the young princess, passing into the antechamber. "Has Mrs. Bredalbane retired yet to rest?"

"No, your Royal Highness," said Lady Prescott, and hastening to draw aside the curtain in the doorway, she thus afforded ingress for the youthful Charlotte to the inner room.

"Now, ladies," said the princess, coming to the point at once, and addressing herself in an earnest and serious manner to Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott, "I have done you a service to-night and am about to crave a boon in return. The service which I rendered you was by forbearing from mentioning to the queen that conversation which, to speak candidly, I overheard from the very first syllable of the narrative down to where it was so suddenly interrupted by the ejaculation which burst from my own lips on the appearance of her Majesty."

"Your Royal Highness heard all?" ejaculated the two bedchamber women, as if speaking in the same breath.

"Yes, every syllable relative to my uncle Ernest — or the Duke of Cumberland, as I would rather call him," added the princess, with a shudder, "for if the dreadful suspicions which I have formed be true, I would rather not acknowledge him as a relative."

"Your Royal Highness must not judge too hastily," exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane. "The remainder of my narrative —"

"Well, I long to hear it," interrupted the princess, "but I dare not remain here many minutes now. The queen is perhaps watching me, espying my actions, and she may either return to my room —"

"Oh, heavens! if her Majesty should have seen your Royal Highness come hither!" cried the Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane. "She would discharge me at once."

"No, the queen did not see me come hither," said the princess. "And recollect," she added, proudly, "I may some day become Queen of England, and then I shall know how to reward those who serve me now."

"Your Royal Highness may command us in all things," said the two ladies, again speaking, as it were, in the same breath.

"A thousand thanks for this assurance," exclaimed

the princess, in a tone of fervid gratitude. "Will you undertake to deliver or to forward a note from me to my aunt Sophia, as early as possible to-morrow?"

"I have obtained leave to go to London to-morrow morning," said Lady Prescott, "and I will undertake to deliver your Royal Highness's note to the Princess Sophia."

"Then give me pen, ink, and paper," exclaimed Charlotte, in a joyous tone.

Writing materials being accordingly supplied her, she sat down and penned a few hasty lines to her aunt. Then having folded, sealed, and addressed the letter, she entrusted it to Lady Prescott, who solemnly reiterated her promise to deliver it next day.

"And now, dearest princess," said Mrs. Bredalbane, in an imploring tone, "do pray return to your own chamber."

"On one condition," exclaimed Charlotte, "which is, that you permit me to avail myself of the earliest opportunity to visit your room again, in order to hear the rest of your narrative, and see that letter —"

"Yes, yes, whenever your Royal Highness thinks fit," ejaculated Mrs. Bredalbane. "But for to-night, oh, not for worlds would I say another word upon the subject, the queen has alarmed me so —"

"Well, my good friend, you shall be alarmed no longer on my account," interrupted the princess, with an amiable smile, and bidding the two ladies good night, she retraced her way to her own apartment.

There she retired to rest, to dream of her injured mother, Sellis, the Duke of Cumberland, the mysterious letter, the vixen queen, and a host of fearful or unpleasant things, all confusedly jumbled.

CHAPTER XXV

THE PRINCESS SOPHIA AND HER BROTHER

It was about one o'clock on the day following the incidents just related, and the Princess Sophia had only just risen from her couch. She had not gone through the complete operations of the toilet, but with her hair negligently gathered up under a French cap, her luxuriant form wrapped in an elegant robe-de-chambre, and her feet thrust into satin slippers, she had thrown herself upon a sofa drawn near the fire in the dressing-room communicating with her bed-chamber. Under the plea of having letters to write, she had dismissed her attendant ladies for the present, but scarcely had the door closed behind them and she found herself alone, when she pressed both her hands to her throbbing, burning brows, as she murmured to herself, "Great God! the horrors of the past night!"

Then, with her head hanging back over the cushion of the sofa and her hands still pressed against her forehead, she remained for some minutes motionless and silent, in an attitude of blank despair.

"Oh, it was indeed a night of horror," she murmured to herself again, as she at length slowly raised herself from that posture and withdrew her hands from her aching brows. "Heavens! the misery of that moment when my eager looks plunged into the recess will haunt me to the last hour of my existence. But wherefore does not my brother come? 'Tis one o'clock, and he promised to be here by midday."

As thus she mused, her eyes remained fixed upon the timepiece toward which they were turned, and as the light from the window, tinted with the roseate hue caught from the crimson curtains, fell upon her countenance with a sort of Rembrandt effect, it showed off her finely shaped

but sensuous profile to its best advantage. That rosy-tinted light imparted, too, a delicate bloom to her magnificent bust, which the negligent wrapper left more than half-exposed, and her whole appearance was that of a woman formed to experience the raptures of love, and to kindle to the highest degree the flame of enjoyment on the part of him who might share love's pleasures with her. But the barbarian law enacted to prevent the blood of royalty from mingling with that of a subject had prevented that woman, so luxuriant in form and so voluptuous in disposition, from experiencing the lawful joys of love in the connubial state, and had forced her to gratify the ardour of her temperament by illicit amours. Oh, the atrocity of the Royal Marriage Act! Did it not make harlots of nearly all the daughters of George III? And this tremendous demoralization was allowed to take place rather than permit any of those royal ladies to become the wives of British citizens. What an idea must the monster king have had of the richness of his family blood when he took so much pains to prevent it from mingling with that of an English subject! No doubt the best blood that flowed in the veins of the oldest members of the aristocracy was but a plebeian puddle in his estimation. His family's blood indeed! The idea of an act of Parliament to protect that scrofulous, leprous, foully diseased blood from mingling with any other! Out upon the abhorrent mockery! Let us heap loathing, hatred, and scorn upon the inhuman policy that devised the Royal Marriage Act.

To continue our narrative. The painful reverie of the Princess Sophia was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of one of her female attendants to announce that her brother the prince regent wished to see her immediately. Gathering the wrapper closely around her form, the princess desired that he should be at once admitted, and in a few minutes his Royal Highness made his appearance. But his countenance was severe and even stern, and his manner was cold as he took a chair opposite to the sofa on which his sister was seated.

"Something is wrong, George?" she at once exclaimed, a mortal terror seizing upon her. "Tell me what it is, keep me not in suspense. I suppose the wound has proved fatal."

"No, your son lives, and the wound is not mortal," said

the prince. " In fact, everything connected with last night's adventure is satisfactory enough, so far as we are concerned. But at the very time that I was arranging plans to gratify your wishes in respect to your son, you were plotting and intriguing against me, ay, and with my own daughter, too."

" Ah! what mean you, George? " cried the princess, flinging upon her brother a frightened look.

" Answer me one question immediately," he said, in a severe tone; and gazing upon her with a look which seemed to bid her beware how she deceived or trifled with him, he asked, " Have you written to a certain person styling himself Jocelyn Loftus — "

" Then Charlotte must have betrayed me! " exclaimed the Princess Sophia, the angry blood mantling upon her cheeks. " Oh, this is unkind, most unkind on her part — "

" No, my daughter is not a traitress of that ignoble stamp," interrupted the prince regent. " But there is no necessity to practise any concealment or affect any mystery in the affair. Charlotte penned a long letter last night to her mother, and that letter happened to meet the eyes of the queen."

" Well, George," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, " I confess that I took compassion upon the distress of mind in which my niece was plunged — But are you aware of the extent of her knowledge? Do you know that your daughter — "

" I know everything," said the prince. " Charlotte listened to some discourse which was taking place yesterday morning between her grandmother and Mrs. Owen, and misunderstanding one portion, and allowing her excited feelings to exaggerate another, and indeed mistaking the whole drift of the conversation — "

" Can I really believe you, George? " asked the Princess Sophia, gazing up steadfastly into his face. " Because if you are telling me the truth, I should be so glad, so very glad, to learn that this conspiracy does not exist."

" It does not," answered the prince, with the most brazen effrontery, " nowhere except in the brain of my silly daughter. As a matter of course, I have persons watching my wife's actions; that I have reason for doing this, you may believe or not as you choose. At all events," added the prince, haughtily, " I am the best judge of my own private

affairs. But as for any conspiracy for accusing my wife of crimes whereof she is not guilty, or, in plain terms, of ruining an innocent woman, I pledge you my soul it is all a fable, a chimera."

And as the prince gave utterance to this tremendous piece of perjury, he looked at his royal sister so steadily, so unblushingly, and with such an air of conscious integrity, that she was not merely staggered, but positively persuaded he was speaking the truth.

"I am glad, my dear brother, nay, more than glad, positively delighted," she said, "to hear you speak in this manner. I confess that I have written a letter to a certain Mr. Jocelyn Loftus, whose name Charlotte mentioned to me, and who is supposed to be at Canterbury."

"Then the best thing you can do," interrupted the prince, "is to write another letter and unsay all you have penned in the first; and at all events, if he should happen to come up to London, you will do well not to see him, for he is a mere adventurer, a profligate young scamp — "

"Indeed! is this his character?" exclaimed the princess, in astonishment.

"It is," returned her brother, "and he goes about under a false name, practising his iniquities and pursuing his debaucheries. It was on that account he was imprisoned in Paris. But enough upon this subject. Promise me that you will interfere no more in the affair, and all will be well."

"I promise you faithfully," answered the princess, "and I will this very day write to Mr. Loftus to the effect that my letter of yesterday originated in a mistake. Should he come up to London before my second letter can reach him, I will give orders that he be not admitted."

"You will act wisely," said the prince, "and when you have an opportunity, I beg you to counsel my daughter, and use your influence with her to curb this rebellious spirit of hers, and not to give way to her own headstrong opinions. The queen has sent me a long letter this morning about her, for it appears that some altercation took place between them last night. However, I shall now look out for a husband for Charlotte, and when she is married, she will perhaps be less a source of uneasiness and vexation to me."

"But she is so very young!" exclaimed the Princess Sophia.

" Young! " echoed the prince regent, " why, she is close upon eighteen years of age." Then, bending a look of peculiar significancy upon his sister, he said, " The females of our family, Sophia, cannot be married too early."

The princess's countenance, her neck, and all that was seen of her shoulders instantaneously became crimson as a peony, for those words smote her as a taunt and a reproach, her brother being well aware of her frailty.

" You might have spared that observation, George," she said, the tears starting forth upon her lashes.

" Well, well, I did not mean to afflict you," said the prince, in a soothing tone. " It was a random remark, and not intended to wound your feelings. But now let me repeat for your consolation, that so far as the incidents of last night are concerned we are safe enough."

" And he — the boy — my son," faltered the princess, " is still at the surgeon's to whose house he was conveyed? "

" To be sure," returned the prince. " You do not think that with such a wound he could possibly be removed yet awhile. Besides, when he is convalescent where shall he be removed to? Not back to Fleet Lane."

" Oh, no, no," exclaimed the princess. " For Heaven's sake never let him see that dreadful man again. Oh, the glimpse that I caught of his countenance was sufficient to make me shudder for the rest of my life, whenever his image starts up in my mind. But does he suspect, does he know who it was that thus swooned in the presence of that tragic spectacle? Did he, in a word, recognize me? "

" I do not think he did," answered the prince, " but that he saw your face is probable, because your veil had blown aside where you fell."

" Tell me all the particulars," said the princess. " Give me those details of which I am as yet ignorant, — how you got the boy away, whether any passers-by saw you — "

" I will satisfy you in a few words," said the prince. " Coffin had not joined me more than a couple of minutes at the extremity of the bridge, and scarcely had I paid him the amount agreed upon for the night's service, when a female rushed past. She had on a cloak and thick veil, and seemed poorly clad, but the frantic pace at which she was speeding along instantaneously attracted the notice of myself and Coffin. At the instant she passed us her

veil blew aside, and we caught a glimpse of her countenance. It was known to us both. No matter who the female was. Suffice it for you to know that we did recognize her as she thus swept past like a maniac, or like one in a state of frenzied horror. But she saw not us. Coffin was about to pursue her, for he had certain reasons for wishing to speak to her, and those reasons also accounted for her being there at that time of night. But at the same instant, just as Coffin was on the point of springing forward and catching her by the arm, a fearful scream came thrilling through the night air. 'Hark!' exclaimed Coffin, clutching me by the arm, for we were both startled as suddenly as if the earth had been opening to swallow us up. But instantaneously feeling assured that something was wrong, struck by a presentiment that the shriek came from your lips, and not pausing to reflect upon the imprudence of bringing Coffin into contact with you, I sped along the bridge as if wings had suddenly fastened themselves to my feet. Coffin, who as well as myself had lost all further thought of that female who had swept past us so frantically, and whom we had recognized, was close at my heels. On gaining the recess, we beheld you lying senseless upon the pavement, and the youth inside stabbed with a poniard. The truth flashed to my mind in a moment, and it simultaneously occurred to Daniel Coffin with equal force. We knew, we understood, we comprehended it all. 'Twas the hand of the female whom I have mentioned that had done the deed."

"Fortunate, then, oh, most fortunate, was it for me," exclaimed the princess, "that accident should thus have shown you who the base assassin was. Otherwise the most terrible complication of circumstantial evidence would have pointed at me. Oh, I shudder, I shudder, when I reflect upon the risk that I ran and the horrors I encountered last night. But who," suddenly demanded the princess, "was the murderess, and what was the wretch's motive?"

"Restrain your curiosity on this point," said the prince. "Suffice it for you to know that the female in question had some spite against Daniel Coffin, and hearing that he was to be upon the bridge last night, she availed herself of the opportunity, as she thought and hoped, to wreak her vengeance upon him, but by a fatal mistake she stabbed that unfortunate youth. There is no necessity to dwell upon these

details. You do not require to be informed that on beholding the tragic spectacle I was seized with horror and dismay. Fortunately not a soul was passing at the time, and to snatch you up from the pavement was my first impulse. You opened your eyes, your veil was away from your face, and you caught a glimpse of the countenance of Daniel Coffin. Then you fainted again, and I placed you on the seat in the recess. The next moment I turned my attention to the youth, and drawing out the dagger gave it to Coffin. Blood flowed from his breast, but I covered the wound with my handkerchief, and a long gasp convinced me that the poor boy lived. At the same instant a hackney-coach was passing over the bridge. It was empty, we stopped it, the youth was lifted in, and I bade Coffin go with him to the surgeon's in Bridge Street. That surgeon is known to me, and I told Coffin what to say. The coach drove away, and I breathed more freely. All these hurried, exciting, bewildering details had occupied barely a minute. My attention was then again turned toward yourself, but you speedily recovered, and fortunately you were enabled to walk home."

"Fortunately indeed!" ejaculated the princess, "for what would the dependents of the palace have thought had they beheld me brought back in a swoon? But having seen me safe in my own apartments, you then hurried off to the surgeon's."

"Yes, I sped to Mr. Barrymore's," resumed the prince, "and ascertained that the youth was not past all hope."

"And though you were kind enough to come back to me with this assurance," observed the princess, "yet was I unable to subdue the horror of my thoughts. But it must have been very late when you got to bed."

"It was barely one o'clock," said the prince regent, "and that is not late for me. Only I would much rather have to sit up at night for more pleasant purposes. However, I left you with the promise of returning at noon to-day, and if I am an hour or so later than my promise, it is because of the arrival of a courier with that unpleasant letter from our mother."

"But you have been to Mr. Barrymore's?" said the princess, anxiously.

"I have already told you so," rejoined the prince regent. "The youth is out of danger, but still speechless. I invented

some tale to account for my appearing in the matter, and the surgeon asks no questions. He is a discreet man. As for Coffin, I have not seen him since last night; but even if he did recognize you, it matters little — for I have determined," added the prince, emphatically, "to rid myself of that fellow."

"But how?" inquired the Princess Sophia, somewhat uneasily, as if she thought there was to be more bloodshed.

"Oh, I have a plan cut and dried," exclaimed the prince. "Indeed, it was all arranged ready for carrying into operation last night, and had that fellow once reached the receiving-ship off the Tower, he would have suddenly ceased to be his own master. Yes, while your son was being placed on board one vessel for Canada, Coffin would have been shipped in another for the West Indies — Ah! it was splendidly arranged, I can tell you; and the plan is only now delayed by these unforeseen occurrences, — not altogether abandoned."

"I feel that I shall be more at ease when that dreadful man is out of the country," said the princess.

"He soon shall be," rejoined the prince. "And now I must take my departure. I have two matters to attend to this afternoon. One is a privy council, which is of little consequence; the other is a rehearsal for certain private theatricals, which is of very great consequence."

"Private theatricals!" ejaculated the royal princess. "Where?"

"At Carlton House," responded the regent. "Will you come? Only the very, very select, the choicest élite, so to speak, can be admitted, and therefore I have had tickets duly printed. Here are a few for your own use," and he flung down half a dozen upon the table.

"Oh, I could not think of attending," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, "with my mind agitated as it is. Take back your tickets."

"No, no, you may choose to give them away to your very particular friends," said the prince. "Besides, the representation does not take place until to-morrow night, and by that time your spirits will be better. Try and come, it will be so amusing."

With these words the prince regent took his departure, leaving his sister in doubt whether this facility wherewith

he turned from disagreeable topics to scenes of diversion arose from a naturally irrepressible gaiety or from a thorough heartlessness. But while still in the midst of conflicting speculations upon the point, one of her maids entered to announce Lady Prescott.

CHAPTER XXVI

VISITORS AT ST. JAMES'S

When the usual civilities were exchanged between the Princess Sophia and Lady Prescott, the latter presented her Royal Highness with the note which she had promised the Princess Charlotte to deliver. Sophia instantaneously recognized the handwriting, and opening the billet in a hurried manner, she read the following lines:

"Windsor Castle, Midnight.

"I have just now had a cruel scene with her Majesty. That you will hear of it from other quarters is tolerably certain, inasmuch as the queen has discovered that you, my dear aunt, have given me your sympathy and promised me your assistance in respect to my poor mother. I am very, very unhappy. Misfortunes seem to be gathering around me, and never, never did I so much require your consoling presence, your friendship, and your love. But wherefore do I not fly to you? Alas! I am now a prisoner at the castle. My cruel grandmother — pardon me for speaking thus of your mother — has told me that I shall be a captive, and my very servants, when I ride out in my carriage or on horseback, are to perform the parts of spies, gaolers, and guards. It is only through the kindness of Lady Prescott that I am enabled thus to communicate with you. Come to me when you can, but pray do not let any steps the queen may take prevent you from seeing Mr. Loftus. If he should not respond to your summons, I implore you to seek some trusty messenger who will bear a letter of warning, which you must write, to my dear mother. Oh, do not fail in all this. My whole and sole trust is now in you, my dearest aunt. Do not write to me about these

matters; all letters will assuredly be intercepted. But come to me when you can, for I am very, very unhappy."

This letter was by no means calculated to soothe the troubled mind of the Princess Sophia, and when Lady Prescott had taken her departure, her Royal Highness fell into a painful reverie. As if her own cares furnished not sufficient food for her infelicitous meditation, she had now the sorrows of her niece to mingle with her own. But could it be really true that no conspiracy was on foot against the Princess Caroline? Could she believe the assurances which her brother the prince regent had given her upon this subject? She was inclined to do so, because it was no doubt difficult for a daughter to believe that her own mother, and that mother the Queen of England, would be engaged in such a plot. And yet the princess still had her doubts and was tortured with cruel uncertainties, and she resolved to take no further step in the matter until she had maturely considered it in all its bearings. She did not therefore write to Jocelyn Loftus a second letter, according to her promise to the prince regent, nor did she issue any orders against his admission to her presence, should he call at St. James's Palace. Neither did she repair to Windsor to confer with her afflicted niece, but she postponed all further proceedings until the morrow.

And when the morrow came, what did it bring forth? It was a little past noon and the Princess Sophia was seated in her drawing-room, — not in the negligee of a boudoir, but in an elegant morning costume, — when a footman entered to announce that a gentleman who gave the name of Mr. Loftus requested an audience of her Royal Highness. The princess hesitated for a few moments, but at length she resolved to see him, and dismissing the ladies who were in attendance, she ordered the domestic to introduce Mr. Loftus.

The moment Jocelyn entered the room the Princess Sophia was struck with an impression entirely in his favour. It was not because he was so faultlessly handsome, of such a symmetrical form and fascinating appearance, although these qualifications might at any other time have had their weight with the princess, whose temperament was sensuous even to a devouring fervour, but it was rather because the

noblest thoughts were so indelibly stamped upon the young man's brow, and because the first look which he threw upon the princess convinced her that the eyes which sent forth this glance were the index of a soul loftily chivalrous, sublimely magnanimous, and full of the most unsophisticated candour. Indeed, it was impossible to survey this young man and believe that he was otherwise than everything honourable and creditable to human nature.

With a sweet affability the Princess Sophia requested him to be seated, and entering at once upon the subject which had brought them together, she said, "I thank you, Mr. Loftus, for this prompt attention to my letter."

Jocelyn bowed, making some suitable answer, and the princess continued:

"My letter was necessarily brief, for several reasons. In the first place, I was writing to a gentleman whose acquaintance I had not then the honour to possess; secondly, I knew not whether the letter itself would reach you, or into whose hands it might fall; and, thirdly, I was not altogether sure that the information I had received concerning you might be correct."

"And may I ask your Royal Highness what that information is?" said Jocelyn.

"That you have interested yourself deeply in the affairs of her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline, that you have suffered imprisonment in France on account of the chivalrous enterprise on which you have embarked, and that you have recently been rescued by some Englishmen from the hands of the French police agents."

"All this is perfectly true," said Jocelyn. Then, after a brief pause, and with some little hesitation, he observed, "Your Royal Highness will excuse me if I ask how all these facts became known to you?"

"I understand you, Mr. Loftus," said the princess, a blush mounting to her cheeks. "You fear — and your apprehension is natural — that inasmuch as I am acquainted with all these particulars, I must necessarily be in the conspiracy which you no doubt suppose to exist in respect to the Princess Caroline. But when you have read this letter, you will see that you have no ground for any such alarm."

Thus speaking, the Princess Sophia handed to our hero

the letter which she had received from her niece the day before through the medium of Lady Prescott. Then, so soon as Jocelyn had perused this communication, her Royal Highness proceeded to explain to him how the Princess Charlotte had overheard the conversation on the part of the queen and Mrs. Owen.

"I am now convinced," said Jocelyn, "that your Royal Highness has really nothing to do with this dreadful conspiracy. But you will excuse me if at first I proceeded with perhaps more caution than courtesy."

"You are quite right, Mr. Loftus," said the princess. "But my brother, the prince regent, assures me solemnly that there is no conspiracy at all."

"From the lips of Miss Agatha and Miss Emma Owen," observed Loftus, emphatically, "have I received the admission that they are both engaged in such a conspiracy. That their sister, Miss Julia, is likewise an accomplice, is beyond all question; and the youngest sister, Miss Mary, now at Canterbury, as your Royal Highness has heard, can confirm the sad truth. Besides, numerous other incidents corroborate the existence of the conspiracy and point to the conspirators."

Jocelyn thereupon entered into a few hurried details connected with his imprisonment at the prefecture, showing by the proposals which the prefect had made him as the price of freedom that such a conspiracy did positively exist, and that the conspirators must be chiefly personages of the highest rank and influence thus to have been able to set the machinery of French policeism and tyranny at work in respect to an Englishman whose only crime was harbouring the intent of warning the Princess Caroline against her enemies.

Sophia was convinced. All doubt and uncertainty vanished, and she perceived that her brother was wilfully perjured when he pledged his soul against the existence of this conspiracy. But there was still one point concerning which she required some little reassurance.

"Mr. Loftus," she said, "we are met to discourse on a serious subject, and we must stand upon no reserve with each other. You fancied just now that I might be one of the conspirators, and I have proved to you that I am not. Now I seek equal candour at your hands. I have been

informed that you are not precisely honest in your present intentions, that you pass under a false name — "

A peculiar smile gradually appeared upon Jocelyn's classically chiselled lips as the princess thus spoke hesitatingly and timidly, but it was a smile not of conscious guilt preparing to veil itself under the mask of sophistry or effrontery; it was the smile of sublime confidence which the honourable and virtuous man puts on when he hears an accusation which he can easily explain or a calumny which he can readily refute. He thereupon entered into certain details which we are not permitted at present to reveal to the reader, but which the Princess Sophia heard with mingled astonishment and satisfaction, the latter sentiment being experienced because she was well pleased that a young man who had already made so favourable an impression on her mind could prove not only that he was as honourable as he was handsome, but that his honour was of the most magnanimous and lofty description.

For a long time did they continue in earnest and confidential discourse. They viewed the position of the Princess of Wales in all its bearings, they scanned all its difficulties, and they studied all the obstacles which would have to be encountered by any one who strove to succour that unfortunate princess.

" Know you," inquired Sophia, after a brief pause, " who those Englishmen were that assisted you to escape in France? "

" I am still entirely in the dark on that head," replied Loftus. " The only clue that I at present possess is confined to such meagre evidences as that one was called ' my lord,' another ' captain,' and a third Robin; but from certain particulars mentioned in a few notes which passed between me and my unknown friends just prior to my release, I have every reason to suppose that Miss Clara Stanley, the elder sister of the young lady to whom I am engaged to be married, was the instigatrix of my deliverance. I shall call upon Miss Stanley either this afternoon or to-morrow, and perhaps ascertain from her the whole particulars."

" Then, on your release," said the princess, with an arch smile, " you did fly back to Canterbury to behold your Louisa? "

" Yes; and does your Royal Highness blame me," cried

Jocelyn, " if I considered it to be my first duty to convince that dear girl of my safety ere I adopted some new project on behalf of the Princess Caroline? But I have only been in England three days; for within a few hours after my rescue in the manner I have described to your Royal Highness, I had to separate from my unknown friends, assume a disguise, and proceed on foot all the way to Havre, because I had no passport. At Havre I waited till I could obtain a passage for Southampton, and thence I travelled day and night to Canterbury, without passing through London on my way thither. But I am detaining your Royal Highness with my own private concerns, while I ought to be conversing only on the one grand subject of our interview. Had your letter not reached me at Canterbury, I should have started off again in a few days for the Continent, taking care, however, to avoid France. My idea was to pass through Belgium, and proceed along the Rhine."

" And why not still adopt that plan? " asked the princess. " I will furnish you with letters to my injured sister-in-law."

" An idea struck me as I journeyed up to London yesterday on receipt of your Royal Highness's letter, and that is," continued Jocelyn, " if I could only procure an interview with the prince regent, I would appeal to him on behalf of his persecuted wife."

" But he would not hear you," exclaimed the princess.

" Oh, I would force him to hear me," replied Loftus, his cheeks flushing with the generous enthusiasm that inspired his heart. " I feel that I should become so eloquent while pleading such a holy cause that I am almost inclined to hope I should be enabled to produce some little impression upon the mind of his Royal Highness. At all events, if I failed, I should be cheered by the consciousness of having done my duty, and that very failure would nerve me with a determination all the more deeply fixed to defend the Princess Caroline against her enemies."

As Jocelyn Loftus was thus speaking, the eyes of the princess wandered from his countenance to the mantelpiece in the vacant abstraction of her thoughts, and her glance encountered the admission tickets which her brother had given her on the previous day and which were now stuck in a card-rack by the side of the mirror.

" I have it," she suddenly exclaimed. " There will be

no harm in trying what effect your eloquence may have upon the prince regent. At all events, the experiment is one suggested by humanity, kindness, and the best of feelings. But I know that my brother will not voluntarily give you an audience — "

"If I could only meet his Royal Highness somewhere," exclaimed Jocelyn, "if I could but obtain admission into Carlton House — "

"You shall, you shall," ejaculated the princess. "See, here is such a talisman as you require," — and as she spoke her Royal Highness took one of the admission tickets from the card-rack and handed it to Jocelyn, who received it with mingled gratitude and exultation.

He then took his departure, with a promise to call again at St. James's Palace on the following day.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE PRIVATE THEATRICALS

The reader will remember that magnificent saloon at Carlton House where the dance of the aristocratic young ladies took place, and whence there was a communication by means of a glass door with an antechamber. This saloon was now fitted up as a private theatre. A stage had been erected with wings, shifting scenes, a curtain, footlights, trap-doors, and all the usual contrivances and arrangements belonging to efficient dramatic representation. On the floor were placed rows of cushioned seats, and along the sides, as well as at the extremity facing the stage, elegantly furnished boxes were erected. A door had been purposely pierced at the extremity, under the central boxes, to serve as an entrance for the audience, and it was covered with curtains of purple velvet having gold fringes that swept the floor. A place for the orchestra was built in front of the stage, and several pieces of music had been composed expressly for the occasion.

The antechamber adjoining the saloon was converted into a greenroom, an ascent of steps leading from the glass door upon the stage. The whole arrangements had taken place under the superintendence of an eminent theatrical manager, and as money was never spared in gratifying the expensive whims and costly caprices of the prince regent, — a remark which may be applied without a single exception to all the members of royalty from William the Conqueror down to the present day, — every requisite which gold could procure to perfect the elegance, the splendour, and the richness of this bijou theatre had been obtained.

At six o'clock in the evening the prince regent gave a sumptuous banquet to all the amateur actors and actresses

PRINCESS CHARLOTTE

Photograph from painting by Opie

PRINCESS CHARLOTTE

Photogravure from painting by Dawe.

who were to take part in the performances, as well as to a select number of persons who were to constitute the audience. At this splendid festival his Royal Highness wore a court dress, with the Order of the Garter. On his right hand sat Lady Sackville, the brilliant Venetia, the glory of whose transcending charms appeared not only fit to bask in that blaze of light, but also calculated to enhance the dazzling lustre which, shed from the crystal chandeliers and reflected in the superb mirrors, flooded the banqueting-room. There also was Lady Curzon, another grand beauty belonging to the sphere of aristocracy and fashion. Miss Bathurst, Mrs. Arbuthnot, and her daughter Penelope were likewise there, thanks to special invitations sent them by Venetia, and through the interest of the Countess of Curzon, Lady Lechmere had likewise procured admission to this select circle. Lady Prescott, who was only in the second year of her widowhood, but had laid aside her weeds and was said to be looking out for another husband, was also present. In addition to these ladies were at least twenty others, duchesses, marchionesses, countesses, and baronesses, very many of whom had at different times been honoured with the smiles of the prince regent and had bestowed their favours upon him in return.

We said that Venetia sat next to the prince, but on her right hand was Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who was, however, careful not to regard her with any undue familiarity that might betray the intimacy subsisting between them. The Earl of Curzon was also present, and at first he had felt a little piqued at not being enabled to find a seat next to Venetia, for he little thought that the baronet had quite as much claim upon her favour as he himself could advance. Indeed, the baronet's pretensions were in reality the greater, because, although they had both rendered Venetia signal services and each had received his reward, yet be it recollected that the Earl of Curzon had obtained that reward through a mistake in the famous boudoir scenes, whereas Venetia had voluntarily and indeed designedly abandoned herself to Sir Douglas Huntingdon. But if the Earl of Curzon had now failed to place himself next to Lady Sackville, he was somewhat indemnified by having the handsome and dark-eyed Lady Prescott on his right hand, and he soon found that the widow was not only very amiable, good-tempered,

and entertaining, but that she also knew how to fling most mischievous sidelong glances from beneath the jetty fringes of her eyelids.

Lord Sackville was of course present, and he was seated next to Lady Curzon, to whom he comported himself with a courtesy wherein there was an infusion of tenderness which the lady herself failed not to perceive, but which was not very generally observed around the table. The Marquis of Leveson was not amongst the guests. Venetia, who had superintended the invitations, had purposely omitted him, and the prince was too much absorbed in the gaiety of the scene and the pleasures of the table to remark his absence. Besides, there was no lack of dukes, marquises, earls, and barons, and thus the brilliant company comprised about fifty guests, all bent upon enjoying themselves during the evening to any extent that the general feeling might conventionally carry them.

At eight o'clock the ladies withdrew to take coffee in the drawing-room, and soon afterward those who were to appear in the dramatic representation retired to undergo the operations of the toilet. At half-past eight the gentlemen quitted the dinner-table and joined those ladies who still remained in the drawing-room, but at nine o'clock there was a general summons to repair to the saloon fitted up as the theatre. All those personages, male and female, who had been fortunate enough to procure admission tickets, were already assembled in the theatre, and when those ladies and gentlemen who had been the prince's guests at dinner, but who were not to take part in the representations, made their appearance and took their seats in the boxes reserved for them, the entire portion allotted to the audience was filled with the most brilliant assemblage. Indeed, to gaze upon that scene where court dresses and scarlet uniforms mingled with the elegant apparel of the ladies, where ostrich plumes and bird of paradise feathers waved above many a high and polished brow, where coronals of artificial flowers, wreaths of pearls, and tiaras of diamonds shone upon glossy hair or gave effect to hyperion tresses, where bright eyes reflected the light that poured down from the crystal chandeliers, and the crimson hue of the draperies imparted a roseate tint to that flood of lustre in which naked shoulders, bare arms, and half-exposed bosoms seemed dazzling as alabaster, and

where stars, orders, and decorations shone upon the breasts of peers and officers, and jewels of incalculable price gleamed upon the dresses of the ladies, — to gaze upon this scene, we say, was to feel the head turning with the bewilderment of intoxication and the eyes becoming dazzled with this galaxy of diamonds, ornaments, flashing eyes, and natural charms.

But, oh, if at the same instant the thoughts could only have travelled to the dens of poverty on Saffron Hill, the haunts of squalor and of wretchedness in Spitalfields and Whitechapel, the abodes of vice and the resorts of crime in the Mint of Southwark, and the low neighbourhoods of demoralization and famine which lie in the vicinage of Westminster Abbey, or if the imagination, at once taking a wider range and starting off to a greater distance, could only have pictured to itself the pale, pining, perishing factory-slave of Lancashire, or the toil-crushed, persecuted, and down-trampled miner of the North, or the poor labourer in the agricultural district, hugging the iron chain of serfdom through the brutalizing ignorance in which the despot's cunning purposely keeps him, oh, then what a hideous picture would the woes, the miseries, the sufferings, and the wrongs of the millions have furnished in contrast with that scene of splendour, brilliancy, and luxurious ease presented to the view at the private theatre of Carlton House!

But to return to our tale. In the midst of that brilliant assemblage, or, rather, retiring from where the blaze of beauty and of jewels was most dazzling, almost shrinking, then, we might say, into the farthest corner, was one young gentleman who in his apparel, his looks, and his thoughts constituted the sole exception to the splendour, the gaiety, and the innate profligacy which characterized all the rest. This young man was Jocelyn Loftus. Well dressed, it is true, in his usual genteel style, he nevertheless rejoiced in no ribbon, star, garter, or other decoration. Neither was he accompanied by any lady who looked amorously upon him or suffered her knees to press against his own, nor did he take any real pleasure in the scene before him. At the same time, if he felt himself out of place there and in an unsuitable element, it was not that he was overawed by the presence of the aristocracy, or that he was awkward or embarrassed as if amongst his superiors and betters. No, it was because

his lofty mind contemned all the frivolity, the gaud, the grandeur, the pomp, and the display assembled and indeed personified there; it was because his elevated character made him despise that throng, brilliant though it were, as nothing more than a gathering of titled brigands and aristocratic demireps; it was because he regarded them all as the representatives, the votaries, and the supporters of a system which invests the few with inordinate wealth and plunges the millions into the direst poverty.

He was there only because he had a self-imposed duty to perform; he was there, also, by virtue of the admission ticket which he had received from the Princess Sophia; and his object, as the reader already knows, was to seek the opportunity of an interview with the prince regent. But, oh, as he glanced around upon those ladies of rank, wealth, and fashion, as he beheld the shameless exposure of their charms, observed the looks which they exchanged with the titled profligates respectively seated next to them, and saw them basking, as it were, in the voluptuous light which the devouring eyes of lasciviousness shed upon them in return, and as he unavoidably caught the tenor of the remarks which fell from rosy lips or were wafted in wanton whispers to greedily listening ears, he could not help thanking Heaven that he had been gifted with courage and sense and virtue sufficient to enable him to abjure the atmosphere of fashion, that atmosphere which is like the south wind of Oriental climes, laden with the fragrance of earth's loveliest flowers, but bearing pestilence upon its wing.

But let us now glance into the greenroom where the amateur performers were by this time assembled. All the indelicacies of the real stage costume, or, rather, of the ballet apparel at the opera, had been adopted by these fashionable imitators. It would almost seem as if the positive agreement had been, or at all events as if the tacit understanding were, that the ladies who were to take part in the proceedings should be attired in a drapery as gauzy and as scanty as possible. Thus the fine person of Venetia was exposed to an extent that left little scope for the exercise of fancy and gave small opportunity for guesses. Not only were her fine plump shoulders completely bare, but the grand amplitude of her bust was revealed to the eye in a manner which outraged all modesty. Indeed, so large a portion

of her bosom was left bare that it was by no means difficult for imagination to fill up the picture in all its voluptuous perfection. Her dress was not only thus low in the body, but it was equally scant in the skirt, and the splendid symmetry of her limbs was accurately portrayed by the flesh-coloured silk that covered them with such tight-fitting accuracy. Her splendid arms, white and glowing, were naked to the shoulder, and thus was her superb form exposed so that every line could be traced, every deflection and inflection, every sinuosity and swelling charm, every curve and contour, could be faithfully followed by the gloating eye of the observer.

Lady Curzon, who had likewise undertaken a part in the performances of the evening, was apparelled in a manner to set off her own beauties to their utmost advantage. She wore her raven hair in ringlets, which showered like shining jet upon her finely shaped shoulders, whereas Venetia had her auburn hair arranged in massive bands and ornamented with flowers. The other ladies who were to take part in the drama were attired in dresses as gauzy and transparent as those of Venetia and Editha, and nothing could be more voluptuous, nothing better calculated to excite the most laggard passions or fire the fervid ones to frenzy, than this assemblage of beauties so sensuously, so shamelessly exposed. The prince regent retained his court dress, which became the character indicated by the piece for him to perform. Lord Curzon was disguised as an old astrologer, but Sir Douglas Huntingdon and several other nobleman and gentlemen who formed part of the amateur corps retained the same apparel in which they had appeared at the banquet.

The opening piece was called "The King and the Sea-nymphs," and had been written on purpose for the occasion. Its plot was meagre, its structure slight, but it abounded in brilliant and sparkling dialogue, and admitted of all the exciting effects to be produced by voluptuous tableaux.

But avoiding minute details as much as possible, let us resume the thread of our narrative and at once pass from the greenroom to the stage. A silver bell tinkled, and the orchestra — for we should have observed that there was a splendid band present — played a piece of music that stole softly and wantonly upon the senses. Again the bell chimed, after a short space, and the curtain drew up, revealing the

prince regent, who appeared alone upon the stage. He was of course greeted with loud applause, which he acknowledged with that gracefulness of salutation which formed one of the qualities that had obtained for him the distinction of "the first gentleman of Europe." The stage represented the interior of an Astrologer's house, and from a soliloquy which the prince delivered it appeared that this Astrologer not only read the stars but also human hearts, and was consulted as much in love matters as upon any other subject. It further appeared that the prince, who represented the character of King of the City of Pleasures, had come thither for the purpose of ascertaining from the lips of the Astrologer which of the twelve mistresses whom he possessed had proved faithless to him, inasmuch as he had intercepted an anonymous letter crammed full of love protestations, but being without the envelope that had originally accompanied it he was at a loss to ascertain to which particular fair one it was addressed. Having thus made known, in the form of a soliloquy, the object of his visit to the Astrologer, the King of the City of Pleasures awaited the learned man's presence. Nor did he wait long, for in a few minutes Lord Curzon, clothed in the robes and wearing the cap of a sage, made his appearance, and having heard the King's tale, he proceeded to consult a huge book of magic, charms, and other cabalistic devices. Inspired with the suggestions of the great book, the learned Astrologer proceeded to inform the King that if he laid down to sleep on a certain magic couch, the Sea-nymphs would come to talk to him in his dreams and answer all the questions that he might put to them. The King of course rewarded the Astrologer handsomely, and away he went. But scarcely had he disappeared from the stage, when Lady Curzon, enveloped in a cloak, representing Adeliza, one of the King's twelve mistresses, also came to consult the Astrologer. Her dilemma consisted in the loss of a note which she prized very highly and which she was fearful might fall into hands where the writing would be recognized. The Astrologer, laughing in his sleeve at the coincidence which greatly amused him, directed Adeliza to go and induce all her fellow mistresses to dress up as Sea-nymphs, and watch for an opportunity when the King should be sleeping, to gather around him and play their practical jokes upon his Majesty; for the Astrologer

assured her that if she did this and watched her opportunity to introduce her fingers into the King's right-hand waistcoat pocket, she would inevitably recover the lost note. Highly pleased with this advice, Adeliza bestowed a handsome reward on the Astrologer, and took her departure.

Such was the first scene of the drama, and it passed off to the infinite delight of all present, with the sole exception of Jocelyn Loftus, whose thoughts were bent on far more serious subjects. The curtain fell, and when it rose again the stage represented a splendid garden. The King of the City of Pleasures was now discovered reclining on the magic couch which the Astrologer had lent him, and which was supposed to be placed in the summer-house on the grounds belonging to the royal palace. The Astrologer, who was a funny fellow in his way, had contrived this magic couch to be as uneasy as possible, and the King amused the audience by many ejaculatory complaints uttered in the way which on the stage is called " aside," but which means that such remarks are to be made louder than any others. And now, to the sound of delicious music, did the Sea-nymphs make their appearance, Venetia as their Queen bearing a wand in her hand.

But here we must interrupt the progress of our narrative for a moment, to observe that had it not been for the enthusiastic outburst of applause which welcomed Venetia and her fair companions, an ejaculation that fell from the lips of Jocelyn Loftus would have startled every one present. It was an ejaculation of utter amazement, an ejaculation which he could not have suppressed had the utterance of it cost him his life at the same moment. But fortunately for him it was lost and absorbed in the loud and prolonged welcome that greeted the train of aristocratic actresses.

Over the heads of the applauding throng that occupied the cushioned seats in what may be termed the pit of the theatre, from his retired corner, were the looks of Jocelyn fixed upon one of those lightly dressed and seminude beauties representing the Sea-nymphs. Could it be possible? Was it indeed she, or only a wondrous, marvellous resemblance? And yet it was scarcely possible to err? There was the same classic outline of the profile, the same grandeur of form, the same look; there were the same lips, the same unmistakable expression of the eyes; and there also was the bright glory of the auburn hair.

A certain sickening sensation came over Loftus — a tightening of the heart-strings, and he felt as if he were almost about to faint. Passing his hand over his eyes, as if to dissipate any delusion that had started up before him, he again fixed his looks upon that resplendent creature who had thus so deeply, deeply absorbed all his interest, and the longer he gazed, the more convinced became he that it was no mere resemblance on the part of another, but she herself, whom he remembered so completely and so well.

But what name did she bear at Carlton House? In a word, who was she? He was about to lean forward and ask the question of the gentleman who sat nearest to the corner where he had placed himself, but suddenly recollecting that on presenting his admission ticket in the hall below, he had received a programme of the representations printed upon white velvet, he drew it abruptly forth from the pocket into which he had thrust it, and where it had remained forgotten until this moment. Hastily unfolding it, but with fingers that trembled nervously, Loftus looked to ascertain who was performing the character of Queen of the Sea-nymphs. But the velvet programme dropped from his hands as he read the name of Lady Sackville!

"I understand it all now," he murmured to himself, and sank back into his corner with feelings that defy all power of description.

For several moments did he remain absorbed in reflections of a character as painful as they were conflicting. In the meantime the action of the drama progressed upon the stage, to the infinite delight of all present, save our astounded, dismayed, and afflicted hero. Venetia, in the capacity of Queen of the Sea-nymphs, had to deliver several speeches replete with brilliant wit and sparkling humour, and these she enunciated in a style that, joined with the soul-seeking melody of her harmonious voice, produced a thrilling effect upon the audience. Lady Curzon's performance was also highly effective; and there was a scene where Venetia had to apostrophize the sleeping King of the City of Pleasures, during which Adeliza seized the opportunity to fall upon her knees and get back her note from the King's pocket. That portion of the performance elicited great applause, and it was just at this point that Jocelyn Loftus, awaking from his reverie, again fixed his eyes earnestly, attentively, and

scrutinizingly upon Venetia, in order to clear up any doubts which might remain in his mind relative to the idea he had conceived. But the longer he surveyed that splendid creature, whose animated complexion now gave increased brilliancy and effect to her faultless features, and who availed herself of every opportunity permitted by the part she was enacting to exhibit all the charming graces of her person and all the seductive witcheries of her exquisite beauty, the less room was there for doubt. Indeed, as the music of her delicious voice floated through the warm and perfumed atmosphere of that brilliantly lighted saloon, its accents, its harmony, its intonations, all fell familiarly upon Jocelyn's ear.

He was now seized with a sudden repugnance to remain in that place any longer. The atmosphere grew oppressive to him; it seemed as if he were breathing the air exhaled by all that is profligate, immoral, meretricious, and foul in the sphere of rank and fashion. He even felt as if he were committing a crime by lingering in so tainted an atmosphere. Seizing his hat, he resolved to take his departure at once, and accordingly issued forth by the door covered with the purple velvet curtains. But scarcely had he set foot on the landing outside, when he recollected that his whole and sole object in coming to Carlton House at all was to obtain an interview with the prince regent, and in this aim he did not wish to be disappointed. He therefore accosted a footman, saying, " I feel too indisposed to remain in the saloon any longer, but I am most desirous to say a few words to his Royal Highness before I take my departure. Will you be so kind as to show me to a room where I can wait until the representation is over? "

The footman instantaneously complied with this request, and escorted our hero to an adjacent parlour, where a lamp was burning.

" What name shall I mention to his Royal Highness? " asked the footman, as he held the door ajar.

" Give me writing materials, and I will pen a few lines, which you can hand to his Royal Highness immediately after the performance."

Jocelyn's request was obeyed, and having written a note earnestly and solemnly imploring an interview with the prince, he folded, sealed, and gave it to the footman. The

domestic retired, and our young hero, being left alone, relapsed into a train of gloomy reflections.

Thus three hours dragged their slow length away, and, in the meantime, let us see what was taking place in another part of Carlton House.

The performances were over, and the larger portion of the audience had taken their departure to their own residences, but the more immediate friends of the prince — indeed, the same who had dined with him previous to the commencement of the amateur representation — assembled in the supper-room, where an elegant repast was served up. The ladies who had figured in the performance retained their gauzy raiment, and thus the board seemed to be embellished with the exposed charms and wanton looks of courtesans rather than of ladies priding themselves on their lofty rank, and standing, as it were, on the highest pedestals of the social sphere.

As the wine circulated freely after supper, and the coral lips of beauty sipped the champagne-nectar of Épernay, the colour deepened upon the cheeks, the eyes flashed more brightly, the regards became more tender and more wanton, the conversation grew more free, and the little familiarities of friendly conviviality became enhanced into positive license. Venetia again sat next to Sir Douglas Huntingdon; the Earl of Curzon had managed to remonopolize the handsome widow Lady Prescott, who, be it observed, appeared nothing loth thus to receive his attentions; while the Countess of Curzon was again the companion of Venetia's husband, Lord Sackville. As for the prince regent, he drank so copiously that he was soon in a very agreeable state of intoxication, and thus devoting himself entirely to the bottle, or, rather, to the bowl of curaçoa punch, he ceased to take notice of his guests, and was taken little notice of by them. Jocelyn's note had been put into his hand, but after hastily scanning its contents he consigned it to his waistcoat pocket, and soon forgot all about it.

At length his Royal Highness fell asleep in his chair, and then the company began to break up. Lord Curzon conducted Lady Prescott to her carriage, and pressed her hand as he took leave of her, a pressure that was assuredly returned, though slightly and timidly perhaps. He then sought his own carriage, to which his wife had just been

escorted by Lord Sackville, and as the earl and Editha thus rode home together, a somewhat interesting as well as curious discourse took place between them. Of this, however, we shall say more anon. Meantime let us hasten to state that Sir Douglas Huntingdon and the other guests having all taken their departure, Lord and Lady Sackville withdrew to their own chamber, where they passed the rest of the night together in each other's arms, but inspired only by the appetite of passion and not by the tenderness of love.

The prince had been left sleeping in his chair, but when the domestics aroused him for the purpose of conveying his Royal Highness to his chamber, he repelled their services, overwhelmed them with drunken oaths, and swore that he was as sober as any man in Christendom. Thereupon, one of the lackeys ventured to remind him that the gentleman who had sent the letter was still waiting, and the prince, having some vague and confused idea of the circumstance, declared that he would see Mr. Loftus without delay.

But in the meantime was not Jocelyn wearied of thus waiting? Yes, nevertheless he waited still, because he deemed it his duty to see the prince if possible. It was now one o'clock in the morning, more than three hours had passed, and nobody came. Fancying that himself and his note must have alike been forgotten, he was about to ring the bell, when the door suddenly opened. Jocelyn rose on catching sight of the prince, but he was at the same moment struck with stupefaction on observing his Royal Highness stagger forward a pace or two, then reel sideways, then totter back as if about to fall, then stagger forward again, and then advance with a rolling, reeling, staggering gait, and in a zigzag manner, toward the spot where Jocelyn remained transfixed. The truth became apparent enough,— the prince regent was in a beastly state of intoxication.

Heavens, what a spectacle! His wig was all dishevelled and awry, pushed completely around upon his head, so that the wavy curls which were usually worn in front were now just above the right ear; his eyes were bloodshot, his cheeks flushed to a degree that seemed to portend apoplexy, his under jaw hanging down, and thus giving an air of hebetation and stolid vacancy to his countenance. Add to these symptoms the disordered shirt-frill, the waistcoat unbuttoned and covered with vinous stains, and the hands thrust

rakishly into the breeches pocket, and the reader may form an idea of the pretty figure which his Royal Highness cut upon the present occasion.

Jocelyn was grieved as well as astonished. Yes, grieved, because he felt how deplorable was the political system that gave the country a beastly sensualist to rule over it; grieved, because his own noble spirit as a man was shocked at beholding the utter degradation of one who had such golden opportunities of being the brightest ornament of his species; grieved, too, because he saw, all in an instant, how utterly useless were the pains he had taken to procure this interview.

"Well — eh — sir-rah, wha-a-t the deu-eu-ce has brought you here, eh?" faltered the prince, as he staggered up to Jocelyn, and then stood reeling, inclining, bending, and tottering, as if he were endeavouring to balance himself upon a tight-rope. "So you sent me — hic — a note-ote — eh? — beg-eg-ging an inter — what the devil d'ye call it — hic — inter-view — that's it. Well-el — now you've got your wish — ish — and so out with it — hic — hic — damn this floor — it's so uneven — I can't keep-eep — my — my — bal — al — alance!"

And after several vain and ineffectual endeavours to keep his footing, and many noddings and bobbings of the head, the first gentleman in Europe tumbled heavily upon the carpet. Jocelyn's prompt impulse was to rush to his aid and lift the fallen prince, but at the same moment his Royal Highness threw up the contents of his stomach all over himself and the carpet, and Jocelyn, ineffably disgusted, turned away, rang the bell violently, and quitted the room.

On the following morning, Jocelyn called upon the Princess Sophia, with whom he remained in deep consultation for upwards of an hour; and on taking his leave he returned to the hotel in Covent Garden, where he was in the habit of taking up his quarters when in London. There he penned a long letter, which he addressed to Lady Sackville, and which he forthwith despatched to Carlton House. He then ordered a post-chaise, and by ten o'clock in the evening once more entered the ancient city of Canterbury.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MATRIMONIAL STORMS

It was the morning after the scenes and entertainments just described, and if we penetrate into the breakfast-parlour at the Earl of Curzon's house, we shall find his lordship and Editha lounging at the table, sipping their chocolate, and carrying on a broken kind of discourse with listless tone and idle manner, partly real and partly assumed.

"And so last night, while we were returning home in the carriage," said the Earl of Curzon, "you intimated that I paid a little too much attention to Lady Prescott — "

"I did not make the remark, Charles," interrupted Editha, "before you said something sneering and sarcastic concerning Lord Sackville's attentions toward me."

"Well, I only said what I thought," resumed the nobleman, stretching out his arms and yawning. "Sackville is a deuced handsome fellow, and I told you that I thought he was smitten with you, that was all."

"No, it was not all," said Editha, extending herself with a still more languid abandonment upon the sofa, or lounge, whereon she was reclining, her symmetrical form loosely enveloped in an elegant morning wrapper, "for you even intimated that I received his lordship's attentions with an apparent willingness."

"I don't think I used the word willingness," observed the earl. "I said that you might have shown him a little more coolness."

"No, reserve was the term, now that I recollect," interrupted the countess, "and I told you in reply that it is not in my nature to appear distant and reserved to any friend or acquaintance, unless it were to resent a marked insult."

"Yes, I recollect your saying all that," observed Lord Curzon, "and I think I expressed my opinion that Lord Sackville's very conspicuous attentions were not received as an insult."

"Assuredly not," responded Editha, still maintaining a tone and look of listless indifference, although in reality she began to be piqued at the undercurrent of satire which perceptibly ran through her husband's discourse. "Received as an insult, indeed! How could you have thought such a thing? Did Lady Prescott receive your attentions as an insult?"

"You asked me that question in the carriage last night," observed Lord Curzon.

"And you told me," said Editha, her lips now curling with a perceptible sneer, "there was not the slightest resemblance between the two cases."

"No more there is," ejaculated the earl, beginning to get excited. "Lady Prescott is a widow, and may be permitted a certain license. She is not to be expected to enact the prude — "

"At all events, your lordship seems to expect that she should not," interrupted Editha. "But it is ridiculous to suppose that you, on the one hand, and in the presence of your wife, may lavish your most tender assiduities — indeed, I may say amorous and truly significant attentions — upon a very beautiful widow, while I, on the other hand, am to be called to an account for merely accepting the most ordinary courtesies."

"But you said all that in the chaise last night," cried the earl.

"To be sure I did. But are we not recapitulating that very interesting and edifying discourse?" said Editha.

"But why recapitulate it?" demanded the earl, impatiently.

"Most assuredly it was not I who commenced it," ejaculated the countess, her cheeks flushing and her whole manner denoting a rising pettishness. "Let me tell you once for all, that I only behaved with common courtesy and politeness toward Lord Sackville. I gave him no encouragement whatsoever; I defy a single soul seated around that table, from the prince down to — "

"The prince indeed!" exclaimed Curzon, with an ironical

laugh. " He was as drunk as an owl, and looked very much like one, too, lolling in that armchair — "

" Yes, Lady Sackville must have a singular taste," observed Editha, with a contemptuous toss of her head, arising from ill-concealed jealousy, " to allow such a loathsome monster — "

" Nonsense! you don't think so in your own heart," said the earl. " I dare say, if the truth be known, you would give ten years of your life to change places with Lady Sackville and become the prince's mistress."

" How dare you insult me, my lord, in this manner? " demanded Editha, but with a passion that was not so well affected as altogether to deceive her husband. " In fact, what cause have I given you to address me in the style which you adopted in the carriage last night and which you are renewing now? I repeat that I only received Lord Sackville's attention with a becoming courtesy; and when the company got heated with wine and began to indulge in certain little freedoms, innocent as your lordship doubtless considers them to have been," added Editha, with a fine vein of sarcasm in her accents, " Lord Sackville abstained from adopting the same course toward me, whereas you did not hesitate to kiss Lady Prescott — "

" 'Twas a mere kiss snatched in fun," observed Curzon.

" Lips are not glued together in jest," rejoined Editha, her eyes flashing the spirit of the sarcasm which her words conveyed, " nor does the hand rest upon the naked shoulder unintentionally, nor, when withdrawn, glide accidentally over the heaving bosom — "

" Ah! " ejaculated the earl, " do you mean to tell me that all this took place between Lady Prescott and myself? "

" I mean to say that it took place from you toward Lady Prescott," replied Editha; " but I may add that her ladyship, ashamed at what thus took place, though perhaps in her heart not altogether unwilling, looked the prude and affected to be shocked. In plain terms, — if I must repeat what I said to you in the carriage last night, — your conduct was infamous, and mine was irreproachable."

" And I tell you in return," exclaimed the earl, now getting too angry to persevere in a tone and manner of listless indifference, " that your conduct toward Sackville was not so innocent as you would have me believe. When he helped

you to wine and you held your glass, I saw his hand rest upon yours with an amorous pressure that was perceptible enough to any one who understands these things — "

" Ah! your lordship is such a proficient," ejaculated Editha, with a taunting laugh.

" You shall say so before I have done," rejoined the earl, " for if you did not kiss each other when in a moment of good humour kissing went all around the table, yet you sat so close to each other that I could see as well as possible his knee pressing against yours; and I have no doubt that your feet were talking mutely though eloquently enough to his under the table. I know you are as deep as a well, Editha, as profound a hypocrite as ever woman was, but nevertheless you could not last night altogether veil the real state of your feelings from me. I saw your bosom heave and fall with sensuous palpitations; I could even follow the occasional thrill of rapture which swept through your form, doubtless when in contact with the knee, the foot, or the elbow of your companion; I marked when he whispered some hurried word in your ear, and which little episode in the tender drama would have passed unnoticed had not the rapid movement of his head been followed by the quick blush mounting to your cheeks; and ever and anon too I caught the veiled look which your eyes flung sidelong upon the glowing countenance of Venetia's husband."

" I have listened silently, but I cannot say patiently, to this long tirade," commenced Editha, in a voice that was tremulous with conflicting emotions, " and I can only say that in return for your gratuitous accusations, your vile imaginings, and your wicked interpretations of the most innocent looks and gestures that you are a liar and a coward — "

" Liar! " ejaculated the earl, his olive-tinted cheeks becoming red as a peony.

" Ay, liar," echoed the countess. " And it is not the first time that I have called you this name. You have accused me of forgeries, you have accused me of adulteries — "

" Yes, and they are all true," thundered the earl, now springing from his seat and dashing his hand violently upon the table.

" Coward — dastard! you had to apologize for those accusations," said Editha, her lips white and quivering with

rage, and her eyes flashing as if pieces of jet could fling forth fire.

"There shall be an end put to all this," exclaimed the earl. "I will have a divorce."

"No, you shall not," ejaculated Editha, in a tone of defiance. "I am not going to humour you thus far," she added, bitterly. "Besides which, you are too sensitive about what you call your honour, to proclaim yourself a cuckold until you hold the proofs of my infidelity in your possession."

"Trust not too much to your own devilish hypocrisy," exclaimed the earl. Then, with accents of bitter taunting, he added, "I dare say your sisters, your aunts, and your mother all thought they were equally secure when playing their amatory tricks — "

Editha sprang up from the sofa like a Fury, her cheeks crimson, her eyes flashing lightning shafts, her nostrils dilating, her lips apart quivering gaspingly, and her whole person vibrating as it were with the rage of a panther. Like a panther, too, did she appear ready to spring with her lithe and supple form upon her husband, who, startled and terrified for the moment, stepped back a pace or two. Then, suddenly turning upon his heel, he burst into a forced laugh, exclaiming, "Admirably assumed, 'pon my honour! 'Tis as good as the play at Carlton House last night."

"Assumed!" said Editha, in a voice of stifling fury.

"Yes, assumed," rejoined her husband. "You would do well for a tragedy queen; your rage is admirable."

"Ah! you dared talk of a divorce just now," cried Editha, "but if there be a divorce between us, it shall be at my instigation against you for cruelty, ill-treatment, and adultery."

The Earl of Curzon indulged in another affected laugh, and then slowly sauntered forth from the breakfast parlour. Proceeding to his own chamber, he dressed himself, and was about to take his morning's ride on horseback, when a footman announced that a young man was waiting to see him, but that he had declined to give any name as he said he called upon his lordship by appointment. The earl, wondering who it could be, immediately repaired to the room in which the visitor was waiting, and the moment he entered he recognized Theodore Varian.

"Ah! you were to have called upon me," exclaimed the

earl. " It was ten days ago that I met you in Nicholas Lane, and you promised me — "

" Yes, my lord, I promised to call, it is true," said Theodore, " but when I explain to your lordship the reasons which have hitherto delayed me, I am certain to obtain your lordship's forgiveness."

" Speak, then, young man," said Curzon, " and let me hear what you have to say."

" When I met your lordship in the City, ten days ago," proceeded Theodore, " I was about to call on the villain Emmerson and overwhelm him with reproaches. I entered the office, I forced myself into the presence of that man who has been my mortal enemy. On beholding me he quailed; his iron nerves gave way; his rigid features relaxed; he was afraid. Oh, it was guilt trembling in the presence of outraged, persecuted innocence! Then did I overwhelm him with a torrent of invectives, or, rather, with a flood of reproaches. He was, of course, previously aware that I had received a full pardon; he knew therefore that I had found powerful friends, and doubtless he thought it more politic to conciliate me than to take the high tone and eject me from his office. He accordingly bade me sit down, and begged me to talk the matter calmly over with him. It instantaneously struck me that he meant not merely to make his peace with me, but to invite me to resume my situation in his employment. I accordingly affected to grow calmer; I sat down and listened to what he had to say. He began by declaring how sorry he was that he should have gone to such lengths against me, and expressed his readiness to make all possible amends for his harshness. I let him know that it was through the kindness of Sir Douglas Huntingdon I obtained my pardon, for that gentleman indeed was the author of it — "

" Ah! Sir Douglas? " exclaimed Curzon. " He is an intimate friend of mine."

" And he is my benefactor," said Theodore. " However, to make a long story short, my lord," he continued, " I must inform you that when Mr. Emmerson heard who was my influential patron, he seemed more than ever contrite for his past behaviour, and said that if I considered his taking me back into his service would be the means of establishing a complete retrieval of my character, he would cheerfully

allow me to return. In my own heart I at once resolved to accept this proposition, because I perceived the opportunity it would afford me for carrying out an implacable vengeance; but I pretended to hesitate ere I accepted the offer, and indeed raised some difficulties. But these Mr. Emmerson speedily overruled, and we ended by renewing our engagement."

"But what on earth could have induced him to take you back?" demanded Curzon.

"Because he sees that I have obtained influential friends, and it is in the man's nature to court those who are thus situated; because also he wishes to have it trumpeted forth that he is a true Christian and can forgive those who have injured him; because, likewise," added Varian, bitterly, "he knows that I possess a sister whose good looks have already excited his unhallowed passions. These are his motives for taking me back. The cold calculation of selfishness has prompted him to offer me my old situation; a ferocious thirst for revenge on my part has prompted me to accept of it."

"And you have been with him ever since?" said the earl, interested in the conversation because he not only owed Emmerson money, but the name of that individual was also mixed up in the affair of Colonel Malpas, Editha, and the forged bills, — an affair which, as the reader will recollect, was still involved in so much mystification for the earl.

"In consequence of resuming my duties in the City," continued Varian, "I had to find a convenient residence, and the bounty of Sir Douglas Huntingdon has enabled me to take a neat little house and furnish it comfortably. My sister is installed there, and we are once more tolerably happy. But all these circumstances have so occupied me that I have not been able to call upon your lordship until now, and indeed I do not know that I should even have been able to find time to come to your lordship at all — at least for the present — had it not been for a certain circumstance —"

"And that circumstance?" said the earl, with a sort of presentient anxiety.

"I dare say," observed Varian, with some little degree of hesitation, "that your lordship wonders why I should have made a confidant of you so readily in respect to the

vengeance which I cherish against Emmerson, my resolve to wreak it, and consequently my motives for resuming my employment in his office."

"Well, it does seem strange that you should have spoken so very, very frankly," remarked the earl, "but perhaps you will explain yourself."

"I will, my lord," said Varian. "As a matter of course, your lordship can understand me well when I tell you that the man who is pursuing another with unrelenting rancour seeks every opportunity to inflict the cherished vengeance. He will listen at doors, peep through keyholes, search amongst papers, pry into letters — "

"Ah! I do indeed understand you," said the earl, with a growing presentiment that he was about to hear something relative to himself. "You have done all this? You have made some discoveries of an important nature? "

"Yes, my lord," and Theodore looked steadily but significantly in the nobleman's face.

"Ah! I understand you," said Curzon, trembling with anxiety and suspense. "You have made some discovery that regards me? "

"I have, my lord. But — " and Theodore hesitated.

"You fear that it will be disagreeable? " said the earl, with quivering lip.

"Disagreeable! it will be worse, my lord, for unless you have any previous suspicion, it will be positively startling, perhaps overwhelming."

"Speak, Mr. Varian, speak! for God's sake, speak! " said the earl, in a hoarse voice, and, leaning forward on his seat, he looked Varian earnestly and searchingly in the face.

"But it will be terrible, very terrible, my lord — "

"Speak, I say, speak, I conjure you! Only be sure that you tell me the truth, and whatever you tell me, you must prove."

"Then listen, my lord," resumed Varian, and, after gazing slowly around the room, as if to assure himself that there was no place where anybody might be concealed, he said, "Prepare yourself, my lord, to hear something about her ladyship — your countess — "

"Ah! 'tis as I thought," ejaculated the earl, but in the subdued tone of caution. "I was not altogether unprepared for this announcement. Go on. You see that I am

no longer excited, fear not to speak. What discoveries have you made? What proofs have you obtained? "

"Happening to glance, my lord, over Emmerson's cheque-book," continued Theodore, "I was struck by observing on the counterfoil the name of Lady Curzon for several sums of considerable amount — "

"Ah! she has had much money lately," exclaimed the earl, the mystery now suddenly being cleared up, "but she told me she had it from her sisters. Go on, what next? "

"Considering that this was somewhat strange, inasmuch as I knew that your lordship had also obtained loans from Mr. Emmerson, my curiosity was piqued; and on minutely examining the contents of a private drawer in Emmerson's desk, which I opened by a skeleton key, for you perceive, my lord, that I am systematic, persevering, and methodical in following up my vengeance — "

"Yes, yes," said the earl, impatiently. "But what found you in the secret drawer? "

"A letter, my lord, from Lady Curzon to Mr. Emmerson," answered Theodore; "a letter the contents of which leave no doubt as to — "

"Go on, go on; you hesitate? "

"Oh, it is natural to hesitate when about to assure a husband of his wife's infamy. And now, my lord," added Varian, "I cannot speak more plainly."

"Heavens! then I am indeed dishonoured," said the earl, in a deep and ominous voice, while his cheek blanched, his brows became corrugated, and his hands clenched involuntarily. "But that letter — what said it? Where is it? Have you brought it? "

"No, I have not, my lord," replied Varian. "I dared not abstract it; for if it were missed, the whole current of Emmerson's suspicions would be turned upon me. But that the contents of that letter are damnatory enough, your lordship may judge when I tell you that allusion is made therein to the meetings of the countess and Mr. Emmerson at an infamous house in Soho Square."

"Mrs. Gale's! I know it well," exclaimed the earl. "But is it possible that my wife has abandoned herself to that grovelling muck-worm, that base-born money-grubber? "

"It is possible, it is true, my lord," returned Theodore, impressively. "But the reason that I have come to you

this morning is connected with this matter; and as Mr. Emmerson fortunately sent me to the West End, I have found this opportunity — "

"What else have you to communicate?" demanded the earl. "Of course the business cannot rest here. Not for a day, not for an hour, scarcely even for a minute can I restrain my fury."

"Patience, my lord," interrupted Varian, "and listen to me. Ere I quitted the office just now — that is to say at about half-past ten o'clock — Emmerson sent out several letters by the boy to the twopenny post. I seized the opportunity of glancing over the addresses, and saw that one was directed to her ladyship the Countess of Curzon — "

"Ah!" ejaculated the earl, "then may I obtain a proof of her frailty. You say the letter was posted an hour back?"

"Yes, my lord, and therefore in about a couple of hours more it will be delivered at this house. Can you not intercept it? Can you not obtain it from the postman?"

"I will wait for him in the street," said the earl.

"And if," hastily resumed Theodore, "it should prove to be a letter which, after reading, you should wish still to reach the hands of her ladyship, your lordship can reseal it, for here is a piece of Emmerson's own sealing-wax, and here is a broad seal with his crest upon it. Ah! my lord," added Varian, as he handed Curzon the wax and the seal, "you perceive that I have neglected no detail — however minute, however insignificant — in following out my vengeance."

"But in what way, Mr. Varian, can I reward you for giving me this information?" asked the earl.

"By crushing the scoundrel Emmerson," responded Theodore, with a look of diabolical ferocity; "by overwhelming the miscreant so soon as he is placed in your power. Cover him with infamy, unmask him as a vile seducer and infamous adulterer, prosecute him in the law courts, obtain damages against him, show him no mercy, seize his goods, seize his person, plunge him into gaol, ay, and keep him there till he rots — till he rots — and dies — dies miserably!"

The emphasis with which Theodore Varian gave utterance to these words, with an increasing power of accentuation as he proceeded, conveyed even a more forcible idea than

did his ferocious looks of that diabolic thirst for vengeance which wrung his soul as with a strong continuous agony. Even the Earl of Curzon, who was himself prepared for the consummation of a fearful revenge, gazed with mingled awe and terror upon that young man whose handsome person suddenly became hideous in feature and quivering in every limb, as if shaken by the convulsive throes of some devil that had entered into him.

" Yes," said the nobleman, recovering himself, and even catching the infection of Theodore's utter implacability, " my vengeance shall be terrible. But if it be necessary to obtain that letter which you saw in Emmerson's desk — "

" Then you shall have it," returned Varian, " and anything else you require and that I can do for you shall be done, provided you promise me that the miscreant Emmerson shall receive at your hands no more mercy than Satan will bestow upon the soul which he has purchased as his own."

" Stay one moment," said the earl, as Varian was hurrying to the door. " You promise to serve me upon one condition, and that condition I solemnly undertake to fulfil. But let us join our vengeances, let us unite our forces, so as to strike whomsoever and wheresoever retribution ought to be inflicted."

" Be it so, my lord, be it so," exclaimed Varian, labouring under a strong excitement. " It is a compact: we will make common cause together, and so long as utter, immitigable ruin, consummate destruction, shall overtake that monster Emmerson, the man who has deprived me of my good name, who has made me hate myself, who has stamped me with the infamy of Newgate, and who, more than all that, sought to ruin my poor sister and to make me her brother, the author of that crowning turpitude, so long, I say, as utter ruin shall overtake this man, I am content. Speak then, my lord," added Theodore, in a more collected tone, " and tell me what else you have in view."

" Young man," said the Earl of Curzon clutching Theodore forcibly by the arm, and holding it tight and serried as if in an iron vise, " you know what wrongs are, for you have experienced them, you know what a sense of dishonour is, for you smart under it, you know what a thirst for vengeance is, because your own is insatiable. Conceive, then, what must be my feelings toward any and all who have

had a share in dishonouring me. My wife is a party to that dishonour, the authoress of it, the accomplice, the one, in fact, through whom the blow is struck. She then must be punished. Emmerson is another. But there is still another — "

"Another, my lord! Whom do you mean?" asked Theodore.

"Search you, my young friend, amongst your master's papers," responded the earl, "and ascertain if you can whether the name of Colonel Malpas may in any way transpire in connection with my wife — "

"Ah! now I remember," ejaculated Varian, a thought striking him. "The letter of the countess to Mr. Emmerson alludes to certain bills which she had given to Colonel Malpas, and which she acknowledges to have received back again by private messenger from Mr. Emmerson."

"Then the plot is all unravelling itself," said the earl, rubbing his hands with a demoniac glee. "The plausible, smooth-faced rascal — to invent so fine a story about those bills. When I called upon him the other day in the City, he actually staggered me for the moment. But he must be as consummate a dissembler as my wife is a finished hypocrite. However," exclaimed the earl, suddenly abandoning that musing tone, "'tis for you to procure the letter for me when the time comes, — or any other documentary evidence you can obtain, — in order to bring the case home to Malpas as well as to Emmerson; so that I may not only avenge myself on my wife's paramours, but heap infamy upon infamy on the head of that guilty woman herself."

"I will serve you to the utmost of my power, my lord," said Varian, and he then took his leave of the Earl of Curzon.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE APPOINTMENT

We must now return to Editha, whom we left in the breakfast parlour after that scene of altercation and strife which she had with her husband. She remained alone for upwards of half an hour, pondering upon all that had just taken place, and likewise bestowing some of her mind's attention on the seductive qualifications of Lord Sackville. Presently her reverie was interrupted by the entrance of her faithful dependent, the handsome, courageous, and mischievous-looking Gertrude, who came to inquire whether her mistress had any commands to give her relative to her toilet.

"No, not at present, my dear girl," answered Editha, who always treated her abigail in an affectionate manner when they were alone together. "I have had a frightful scene with the earl just now. All his old suspicions are revived, and new ones have sprung up. He has threatened me with divorce, exposure, and Heaven knows what; but all these heroics I care nothing for, because I am well assured that he will never take any step until he has the fullest proofs in his possession, and those proofs, Gertrude," she added, with a laugh, "he never shall obtain."

"And your ladyship says," observed the abigail, "that his lordship has conceived new suspicions? Surely your ladyship has not —"

"Embarked in a new amour, eh?" said Editha, laughing still more merrily than before. "But indeed I have, my dear Gertrude. No harm is done as yet, however, but I cannot say how soon there will be. 'Tis Lord Sackville, and you must admit that he is a very handsome man."

"Yes, I have seen him here once or twice when he was

plain Mr. Sackville. But for Heaven's sake take care, my lady, since the earl's suspicions are aroused."

"Oh, be not afraid! I will take care," observed Editha. "But to speak frankly, it is somewhat unfortunate that the earl should have conceived these suspicions this morning, for to tell you the truth Lord Sackville last night requested permission to write to me, and in yielding assent I charged him to be sure and send his letter by the post, — not by private hand, — and to send it so that I might receive it about one or two this afternoon. Now, if the earl should take it into his head to intercept my letters — "

"Oh, if that is all your ladyship apprehends," exclaimed the ready-witted Gertrude, "we will manage that, for I will myself go and watch for the postman presently at the end of the street."

"Do so, my dear girl, for that is what I call making sure doubly sure."

We need not, however, dwell any longer upon this dialogue which took place between the profligate Editha and her crafty maid. Suffice it to say that a couple of hours later Gertrude issued forth and proceeded up the street to watch for the postman. In a short time she beheld him advancing from Bond Street; but just as she was hurrying toward him, what was her dismay on beholding the Earl of Curzon himself hurry past her and stop the letter-carrier.

That her master had not recognized her was her first impression. At all events, even if he had, he took no notice of her; and as she was of course anxious to avoid being seen loitering about in the street, she retreated to a little distance, though still watching what took place between his lordship and the postman. And now her heart sank within her as she beheld the letter-carrier place several missives in the hands of the nobleman; and he, immediately on receiving them, turned back and retraced his steps toward the mansion. Gertrude, evidently unperceived by the earl, sped across the street, and turned a little way up a stable-yard so as to avoid him. Then, watching until he entered the house, she hastened in pursuit of the postman, who was delivering correspondence from door to door.

"Have you any letters for Lady Curzon?" she inquired, and with all her spirited effrontery, she was unable to subdue the blush that conscious duplicity sent up to her cheeks.

"There were several letters for Curzon House, miss," answered the postman, "but the earl himself just met me and took them."

"Were there any for her ladyship?" asked Gertrude, scarcely liking to put the question.

"Yes, there were two," was the response, and away sped the postman, giving his sharp double knocks and delivering his correspondence along the street.

With a tightening sensation at the heart — for she completely identified herself with the affairs of her mistress — did Gertrude hurry back into the mansion, and great was the consternation which Editha experienced on learning how her husband had waylaid the postman and intercepted the letters. A quarter of an hour elapsed in hurried, anxious, and bewildered discourse between Lady Curzon and her faithful abigail, both dreading lest an explosion should be imminent, and each suggesting a dozen different plans for meeting any emergencies or contingencies that might arise. But at the expiration of that interval, which, though so brief, was nevertheless full of painful apprehensions, a footman entered the parlour, handed two letters to her ladyship upon a silver tray, and then quitted the room again.

"Two letters?" hastily observed the lady's-maid the moment the door closed behind the footman, "and the earl has doubtless read them both. But are the seals broken?"

"No," returned Editha, carefully scrutinizing the letters ere she opened them. "Here is one from Emmerson; it is his crest upon the seal. But what a quantity of wax he has used. These City people are so very ungenteel in many things. But, ah! this other letter is from Lord Sackville. I do not know his writing, but I know the arms he has assumed since he was raised to the peerage. Ah!" suddenly ejaculated Editha, in an altered tone, "this letter has been opened! See, here is the place where the wax has been broken and then refastened. 'Tis cleverly done, no doubt; but my eyes are sharp as needles —"

"Yes, 'tis clear enough, my lady," said Gertrude; "that letter which you say comes from Lord Sackville has been most certainly opened. And perhaps," she immediately added, as a thought struck her, "the other one has been opened too and resealed, which may be the reason why there's so much wax."

"Well, of course, if the earl intercepted the letters, it was for the purpose of opening them," said Editha, in a musing tone; "and if, having resealed them, he has allowed them to reach my hands, it is that through their means I may be drawn into some snare which will place me entirely in his power. We shall see. And now for the reading of the letters. We will take Emmerson's first, as it may be upon business, whereas I know that Sackville's is about love."

The Countess of Curzon accordingly proceeded to break open the money-broker's letter, the contents of which ran as follows:

"Nicholas Lane, December 11, 1814.

"I write to you, my dear Editha, because it is absolutely necessary that I should see you, in consequence of a certain communication I have received from that scoundrel Malpas, who, having tried all kinds of subterfuges to get out of the King's Bench, has now with characteristic villainy hit upon a scheme which he has imparted to me and which is more or less alarming. For Heaven's sake, then, give me an appointment at your earliest convenience, not only for the reason just mentioned, but also that I may enjoy the ineffable bliss of clasping you, my sweet Editha, once more in my arms. I anxiously await your response. Oh, delay it not. I live only for you, my dear Editha. By the bye, how get you on with the earl? Are all his suspicions completely lulled? I hope so. But you shall reassure me on this point when we meet. Pray, therefore, give me an early appointment, either at Lady L——'s or at Mrs. G——'s.

"Yours ever sincerely and affectionately,

"Thomas Emmerson."

"Heavens!" ejaculated Editha, pale and trembling with alarm, "if the earl has really perused this letter, if he has actually opened it —"

"There can be no doubt of it, my lady," interrupted Gertrude, "and therefore let us consider it granted that he has opened it. But as a proof of your intimacy with Mr. Emmerson, it is fortunately in your ladyship's hands and not in your husband's."

"True!" observed Editha; then tossing the letter into the fire, she said, "Thus perish the proof. And now for Sackville's communication."

With these words Editha opened the second letter, the contents of which were couched in the ensuing terms:

"Carlton House, December 11.

"Language has no power to express the Elysian bliss, the celestial happiness, that I experienced, beloved Editha, in your company last night. Methought you never looked so beautiful! It was rapture to gaze upon you; the pressure of your hand sent an electric flood of ecstasy thrilling through me. Your glorious eyes poured their ardour into the depths of my soul, and your smiles, oh, it was an ineffable bliss to behold them, or, rather, to feel them beaming upon me. My wife is handsome — grandly handsome — everybody will admit, but ten thousand times, my beloved Editha, do I prefer your Oriental style of loveliness. It was the happiest moment of my life when for the first time, the other night at my aunt Miss Bathurst's house, you looked back the language of love in return for the avowal of assion which I was daring and adventurous enough to make. But last night, as I have declared above, rendered me supremely happy. I sat next to you at the dinner-table, I kept by your side in the Green Room, again I sat next to you at supper, and every time we seized the opportunity to press each other's hands I felt immersed in a fount of rapture. Your husband could surmise nothing, because we were so circumspect; and as for my wife, she has no jealousy. Nothing, therefore, need mar the progress of our love. Though secret, it shall not be the less fervid; though veiled and hidden, it shall not be the less impassioned and enthusiastic. You gave me permission to write to you, to commit my thoughts and my desires to paper, and I hasten to avail myself of that permission. This I do, not only for the pleasure of thus communing as it were with you, but likewise because I have bethought myself of an opportunity for us to meet to-night again, and indulge in unrestrained discourse. Strange that I did not last night recollect that Lady Wenlock's long-announced masked ball was so near at hand. Of course you have received an invitation? All the world of fashion will be there. Shall we not, then, avail ourselves of that golden opportunity for meeting, conversing, and perhaps passing two or three hours in each other's company?

"I know, my dear Editha, that you will at once yield an affirmative to all I have just asked. I therefore take it for granted that you will be at Lady Wenlock's to-night. I will be there punctually at nine o'clock. My costume shall be that of a Cavalier of the olden time, with doublet, buskins, cap, and every article of apparel in the most approved style. Ringlets of false hair will flow upon my shoulders, and as a matter of course I shall wear a mask. Do you think you will recognize me in this costume? You can scarcely fail to do so. But as I shall not know how you may be dressed, the usual etiquette must be reversed, and you will have to accost and single out me from the midst of the throng. Your watchword shall be, 'How comes it, Cavalier, that you have left your sword behind you?' and if the reply be, 'Because I expected the companionship of a gentle lady,' then shall you know that it is really I — your adoring admirer — to whom you will be speaking. Farewell, then, until nine to-night.

"Your fond and devoted,

"SACKVILLE."

"A beautiful composition! quite a love of a love-letter! the sweetest of the sweet," exclaimed Gertrude, with a sincere and most unfeigned admiration of the rhapsody.

"Yes, and a pleasant letter for a husband to have read," said Editha, curtly. "But, thank Heaven! he has allowed it to reach my hands, and has not kept it as a proof against me. Now, Gertrude, let us consult what is to be done. Do you think that the earl means to inveigle me into some snare? Would he have allowed this letter to reach me if he did not purpose to make some use of its contents in order to ruin me?"

"Depend upon it, my lady," rejoined Gertrude, "that the earl will devise some means — perhaps forge a letter, as if coming from you — to prevent Lord Sackville from personating the character of a Cavalier at all; but the earl himself will go disguised as a Cavalier, so as to personate Lord Sackville, inveigle you into avowals and confessions of love, and then unmask himself to overwhelm you with confusion."

"Your surmises are admirable, Gertrude," said Editha. "There can be no doubt that you have hit exactly upon

the expedient to which my cunning and crafty husband purposes to have recourse. But we will outwit him. Ah! I have it," she ejaculated, as a thought struck her. "Capital! capital! we will turn the tables completely upon the earl. Talk of forgeries! I will see if I cannot forge a note from him to a certain person. Give me my desk, Gertrude."

The writing materials being placed upon the table, the countess proceeded to pen a letter, which she indited with great care, disguising her own hand to the utmost of her power, and imitating that of her husband with great effect; for be it remembered that this was not the first time she had practised a little in this way. When that letter was finished, she hastened to pen another, but this latter was in her own undisguised handwriting, inasmuch as it was addressed to Lord Sackville, and ran as follows:

"CURZON HOUSE, Dec. 11, 3 P. M.

"Thanks for your letter, my dear Horace. I will be at Lady Wenlock's to-night. But on no account go dressed in the way you have described in your letter. Adopt some plain and unassuming garb, and at half-past eight o'clock be in the conservatory opening from Lady Wenlock's drawing-room. You know it? I shall be there, and shall bring Gertrude with me as a companion, because the circumstances are peculiar, as I will explain. You may recognize me by my dress, an accurate description of which I now give you. * * * Yours affectionately,

"EDITHA."

Where the stars appear in Lady Curzon's letter was given the description of the costume, but which there is no necessity to inflict upon our readers. Suffice it to say that the two letters being duly addressed and sealed, the one in the feigned hand to a certain person, and the other in Editha's usual hand to Lord Sackville, Gertrude undertook to deliver them in person, so as to prevent the possibility of mistakes, and she sallied forth accordingly.

As for Emmerson's letter and the important matter to which he had alluded therein, Editha was compelled to postpone any notice of the same until the morrow, she having quite enough on her hands to occupy herself for the rest of the eventful day of which we are writing.

CHAPTER XXX

THE MASKED BALL

The reader will recollect that in the early part of this narrative we introduced him to the residence of Lady Wenlock in the neighbourhood of Kew. On that occasion this kind-hearted, hospitable, and wealthy widow gave an autumnal fête at her mansion, which stood in the midst of spacious pleasure-grounds, and it was there that the memorable scene took place between Venetia and Colonel Malpas. But some months had elapsed since then, and the hand of winter was now upon the scene. True was it that the shrubberies formed of evergreens resisted the frost, the ice-chill, and the snow of the borean season, and presented their long patches of verdure to the eye. But the shady avenues of summer were now nought save a bleak network of skeleton boughs, and the delicious arbours of roses, jessamine, and clematis had lost their verdure and their floral embellishments, and were shrivelled to a scant interlacement of bare tendrils.

But if nature were cold and cheerless without, all was brilliancy and warmth within the vast and gilded saloons of Lady Wenlock's mansion. By eight o'clock the almost countless carriages had set down a numerous and gay company, lords and titled dames, gentlemen and ladies, old and young, many clad in fancy costumes, and still more wearing masks. The effect was dazzling in the extreme, the dresses exhibiting all the variations of elegance, gorgeousness, and magnificence, and making the saloons resemble parterres of flowers with their infinite minglings and blendings of hue and their illimitable diversification of gaudy splendours.

But we do not intend to dwell upon the description of a scene which our readers can doubtless picture for themselves.

We will therefore simply observe that the utmost gaiety and good-humour seemed to prevail, the masques fulfilled their assumed characters to general satisfaction, the splendid band that was in attendance poured forth its glorious strains through the saloons which were flooded with lustre, rich perfumes loaded the air, and in the apartments where dancing took place this amusement was sustained with a more than ordinary spirit.

It was about half-past eight o'clock when two elegantly dressed females, wearing masks upon their countenances, entered the conservatory which opened from the drawing-room. These were Editha and Gertrude. The reader may think it strange that a high-born countess should take her obscure abigail with her to such a scene, but be it remembered, in the first place, that Editha was very fond of Gertrude; in the second place, that Gertrude was deeply interested in certain proceedings then going on, and most anxious to witness their results; and, thirdly, that Gertrude possessed a shape of perfect symmetry and was altogether a very genteel and indeed superior girl, so that when elegantly dressed, with gloved hands and her mischievous lady's-maid-looking face more than half-concealed by a black mask, she had every appearance of one quite in her place and feeling perfectly at home amidst the brilliant throng at Lady Wenlock's house.

There was nobody else in the conservatory at the moment when Editha and Gertrude entered it. The atmosphere was warm, and perfumed with the fragrance of hothouse flowers. Orange-trees, limes, and several plants from the tropics spread their bright foliage and displayed their green or golden fruit, thus cheating the imagination with the belief that summer reigned within those walls of glass, though winter was chill and hoar and icy without.

"How well we managed to issue forth from the mansion without being observed by the earl," said Editha to Gertrude.

"Yes, my lady," was the response. "His lordship had not left when we came away, but I have no doubt he means to come. Indeed, I am certain that by the frequent goings and comings of his confidential valet all the afternoon preparations were being made for his lordship to appear to-night in a fancy costume."

"Oh, if our stratagem should succeed thoroughly,"

whispered Editha, " how amusing, how exquisite it will be! By the bye, when we left the house just now and entered the carriage, even if the earl were peeping, he could not have seen how we were dressed, as we were both enveloped in those great thick cloaks and had the black veils thrown over our heads."

" Must he not have wondered," asked Gertrude, " supposing that he did see us go out, who on earth your ladyship was taking with you? Or do you suppose he would suspect that your companion was none other than myself? "

" No," responded Editha. " If he saw us at all and thought anything upon the subject, he would suppose that I had invited some female friend of mine to accompany me. But hush! hither comes a masque exactly of Lord Sackville's height, symmetry, and gait."

As the countess spoke these words, a gentleman wearing a mask entered the conservatory, and instantaneously accosting Editha, he whispered, " Dearest lady, I recognize you by your costume," and slightly raising his mask, he disclosed the features of Lord Sackville.

" Let us step aside, Horace, for a moment," said Editha, and taking his arm, she continued to observe, in a low and tender tone, " I am delighted to meet you again."

" And I, Editha, what must be my feelings? " murmured Sackville, who was over head and ears in love with the beauteous but profligate patrician lady, and through the holes in their masks their eyes flashed mingled love, tenderness, and desire.

They had passed farther into the conservatory, accompanied by Gertrude, who walked by the side of her mistress, and when reaching the corner most remote from the drawing-room door, they stood for a few minutes to converse in rapid whispers.

" Tell me all that has transpired," said Lord Sackville, " and to what circumstances you alluded in your note. For about the same time it arrived did I receive another intimation warning me as to this night's costume; but though indirectly intended to excite my fears, it nevertheless only stirred up my curiosity."

" I have every reason to believe," answered Editha, quickly, " that the earl intercepted your letter, read it,

resealed it, and then allowed it to reach my hands, just as if it had never been tampered with at all. Therefore, believing that the earl had thus become aware of the appointment which you gave me for to-night, and that he would assume your character in order to ensnare me — "

"Ah! then this explains the mysterious billet which I received," and as Lord Sackville uttered these words, he drew forth a note which he handed to Editha, who hastily scanned its contents, Gertrude peeping over her shoulder.

It ran as follows:

"Take warning! You propose to be at the masked ball to-night at Lady Wenlock's, but a plot to assassinate you is on foot, and therefore prudence suggests that you should remain away, or, at all events, adopt some costume quite different from that which you originally proposed to wear.

"A Friend."

"Yes, 'tis clear enough," whispered Gertrude to her mistress, in an exulting tone, "the earl's object was to keep his lordship" — alluding to Lord Sackville — "away from here this night. But the earl is signally defeated already, and will be completely humbled."

"Yes, provided the other person comes," added Editha; and she then explained to Lord Sackville the stratagem she had devised to expose her husband and turn the tables completely upon him. "And now," she added, when the hurried details were over, "let us return amongst the masked throng and ascertain whether the delectable earl has as yet made his appearance."

In the meantime the Earl of Curzon had arrived at the mansion, apparelled in the fancy costume of a Cavalier of the olden time. He wore a doublet, buskins, a cap of a Greek shape, and a belt, and he had not omitted the long hair hanging down upon his shoulders. The reader need scarcely be informed that it was his hand which had penned the fictitious warning to Lord Sackville, whom he had indeed come thither to personate in the hope of meeting his wife and drawing her into such a conversation as would place her completely in his power.

On entering the brilliantly lighted saloons, he mingled amongst the throng of masques, in the anxious expectation

of being accosted by Editha, but still wondering somewhat whether she would be there at all.

"It was about three o'clock in the afternoon that Sackville had my anonymous note," thought the earl within himself, "and since then the interval has been too short for him to convey an intimation to Editha either that he will not be here to-night or that he will come in some other garb than that indicated in his letter. I have watched all the comings in and goings out at home in Grosvenor Street this afternoon and evening, and no more letters have arrived, no lackey from Carlton House has called with either note or message. 'Tis true that the minx Gertrude went out in the afternoon almost immediately after Editha received the two letters, but it could not have been to make any fresh arrangement with Lord Sackville, because he himself only received my warning at about the same time and could not therefore in any way have communicated a change of plan to Editha. That all goes well, then, I may suppose. Besides, Editha and her precious maid went out together ere now in the carriage, both cloaked and veiled. Doubtless my wife has brought her abigail with her to see the beauties and mingle in the intrigues of a masked ball. But if so, what an insult to Lady Wenlock and all these noble ladies, to introduce an obscure serving-wench hither! 'Tis clear, even if I entertained any doubt before, that Editha is entirely in Gertrude's power, and she propitiates the artful girl by bringing her to such a scene as this. Oh, it is high time that the progress of such intrigues should be stopped."

Such were the musings of the Earl of Curzon during the first quarter of an hour that he sauntered through the saloons of Lady Wenlock's mansion. Every now and then his eyes were fixed upon some beauteous form whose symmetry resembled that of his wife, and then he scrutinizingly looked to ascertain if the hair of the masked lady possessed that same rich gloss and purply hue which characterized the tresses of Editha; but even when he felt most assured that he recognized his wife in some exquisitely dressed masque who passed him by, he soon found that he was mistaken, as none of all these accosted him with the watchwords pointed out in Sackville's letter.

He passed into the dancing-rooms, he proceeded along the brilliantly lighted passages, he lounged on the superbly

decorated landings, and still no lady accosted him. Half an hour had now elapsed, and he began to think that his plot had failed and that Editha would not come. In the depths of his soul he breathed, as it were, imprecations of annoyance and disappointment, and once more did he retrace his way to the principal drawing-room, where the throng of masques was thickest. Scarcely had he entered this magnificent saloon when a hand was laid gently upon his arm, and, stopping short, he found himself accosted by a lady, elegantly dressed in ball costume, but with her countenance concealed by a thick veil instead of a mask. Glossy ringlets of purply blackness peeped forth from beneath the thick folds of the veil, and as much as the eye could observe of the bare shoulders and arms seemed of that same rich olive-tinted complexion which characterized the warm and impassioned Editha. That it was his own wife who now accosted him the Earl of Curzon felt convinced at the very first glance, and a thrill of almost diabolic exultation penetrated to his heart as the passwords were whisperingly murmured in his ears.

" Cavalier," said the veiled one, " how is it that you have left your sword behind you? "

" Because," was Curzon's prompt reply, and he also spoke whisperingly, so that there might be the less chance of the voice being recognized as his own instead of Lord Sackville's, " because I expected to meet a gentle lady here tonight, and that this expectation is now fulfilled, I have reason to congratulate myself."

Thus speaking he took the veiled lady's hand, pressed it tenderly, and then drew it within his arm, not having the slightest doubt but that it was Editha who had thus become his companion, and toward whom he was practising so much deeply planned dissimulation.

" How charming did you seem last night," he continued to whisper, in that low, murmuring tone which suits, as it were, any male voice when giving utterance to the insidious language of sensuous passion. " It was happiness ineffable to be seated near you, to be permitted to gaze with ill-concealed admiration upon your charms, to catch the sunlight of your smiles and the beams of glory that flashed from your lustrous eyes."

" Oh, my lord," responded the veiled one, likewise in a

low, tremulous whisper, "you are overwhelming me with compliments and flatteries."

"Flatteries!" repeated Curzon, totally unable to distinguish in the voice of his companion any peculiarity of accent to show that it was not the voice of Editha. "In the first place, I never flatter, and, in the second place, even if I did it would be impossible to adopt such a course with you. Because no language could be too exaggerated to express the power of your charms, those charms which have made me your slave."

"But surely, surely," murmured the lady, "you cannot have conceived for me a passion so fervid, so intense —"

"Tell, me dearest, dearest lady," whispered Curzon, as he slowly led his veiled companion amidst the maze of the masked throng, "tell me whether it be the first time that any one has ventured to address you in this language since you were first wooed by him who gained possession of your hand?"

"Oh, would you believe me, my lord," answered the lady, in the soft, tremulous tone which beauty adopts when bashfully confessing the homage that it receives, "would you believe me, my lord, if I were to declare that such language has never been addressed to me before?"

"No, dearest lady," answered Curzon, "I assuredly should doubt your sincerity, because, lovely as you are, brilliant and fascinating as you are, it would be impossible that you could have escaped the thousand adulations, the myriad flatteries, yes, and the innumerable proofs of devotion and love which constitute the triumph of all the stars that shine in the galaxy of beauty. But, oh, think me not too venturous, dear lady, if I ask whether any of those adulations have made an impression on your heart, whether, in a word, you have ever had a lover besides your husband?"

"I never loved but two persons," said the veiled one, murmuringly. "My husband was one —"

"And the other?" said Curzon, inquiringly, and speaking with the bated breath of an assumed suspense, for of course he was personating Lord Sackville toward one whom he believed to be Editha.

"That other?" responded the lady. Then, after a few moments' hesitation, she whispered, "That other — is yourself."

"Oh, if I could be assured of this, how happy, how supremely happy, should I feel!" said Curzon; but in the depths of his soul he silently exclaimed, "Vile, perfidious Editha!"

"Do you not believe me then? Do you suppose that I am telling you an untruth?" and as the veiled lady thus spoke, she pressed the earl's arm with a kind of convincing tenderness. "If I did not love you, I should take your very mistrust of me as an insult."

"Insult! No, Heaven is my witness that I could not possibly insult you," and Curzon affected an exceeding fervour of tone, although still speaking low and murmuringly.

"And yet the words you uttered ere now would almost have implied the belief," rejoined the veiled lady, "that there has been levity in my conduct, that I have given the world reason to speak lightly of me, whereas I solemnly declare that never, never was I faithless to my duties as a wife, never, never have I lost sight of the self-respect belonging to my position in society. That is to say," she added, in a scarcely audible tone of tender tremulousness, "until I last night received from you those attentions which made so deep an impression upon my soul."

"Pardon me, dear lady," said the earl, "if I continue the discourse for a few moments upon this topic. But as you have given me your love, I wish to be assured that it is a love in which only one other, and that other your husband, has ever shared."

"It is so, it is so," said the veiled one; "solemnly do I declare it. What possible reason can you have for supposing the contrary? Has the world ever dared to make free with my name? Has the breath of scandal ever been raised against me? If so, tell me, that I may justify myself, or explain away any circumstances to which in some unguarded moment my conduct may have imparted an air of levity."

"And you will not be angry with me if I tell you what the world says?" whispered Curzon, earnestly.

"I will not, I will not," was the soft and musical response. "Tell me, what says the world of me?"

"In the first place, dear lady," proceeded Curzon, "it has coupled the name of Colonel Malpas with yours —"

"Colonel Malpas!" said the veiled one, with a sudden start which made Curzon feel more than ever convinced that

all his suspicions in that quarter were really true, and that Malpas had been his wife's paramour.

"Yes," he said, "the world declares that the colonel has been your lover."

"Then the world is guilty of the foulest calumny," returned the veiled lady, "for I do not even know Colonel Malpas to speak to."

"Not know him?" ejaculated the earl, inwardly cursing what he supposed to be Editha's astounding effrontery; but, instantly mastering his excitement, he said, "Then the world has indeed done you much wrong, and perhaps it was equally guilty of as foul a calumny when it whispered abroad that you had formed a new intimacy, with a certain stock-broker, money-lender, or whatever he is, of the name of Emmerson."

"My lord, you must positively be dreaming," said the veiled lady, partially withdrawing her hand from Curzon's arm. "But I cannot believe that you are intending a premeditated insult, to which, however, the bare iteration of such a calumny almost amounts, when I affirm, solemnly, sacredly affirm, that I never even heard of the name of Emmerson in my life."

"Then again has the world wronged you most cruelly," said Curzon. "But enough upon this topic. Tell me, sweet lady, did your husband notice my attentions to you last night?"

An ejaculation of dismay burst from the lips of the veiled lady as this question fell upon her ears.

But we must pause for a moment to observe that while the preceding dialogue was taking place, Curzon and his companion had issued from the drawing-room and come forth upon the landing, where they had paused to pursue their discourse. They had then slowly and loungingly descended the great marble staircase, at the foot of which the lady stopped suddenly short, and disengaged herself from Curzon's arm as he put that question which we have last recorded.

"Wretched woman!" he instantaneously said, "you begin to suspect now that something is wrong and that I am not really he whom I have pretended to be. You fancied that you were conversing with another, with Lord Sackville? But behold!" and the Earl of Curzon took off the mask from his face.

By a sudden and impulsive movement his companion threw back her veil in startled dismay, and disclosed to the astounded Earl of Curzon the features of Lady Prescott!

"Perdition! there is some mistake!" he said, grasping her by the arm. "But for Heaven's sake compose yourself," he added, perceiving the mingled astonishment and terror into which his strange conduct had thrown her.

There were very few masques in the hall at this moment, but amongst these few were three in particular, two females and a gentleman, who from a little distance witnessed the scene which we have just described. To the eyes of ordinary observers there was nothing particularly remarkable in it, the withdrawing of a mask and veil, and a mutual recognition in consequence, being a common occurrence on such occasions; while the strong emotions that accompanied this special recognition were so transitory and so speedily subdued that they might easily have been mistaken for the mere expression of surprise without any more powerful or vexatious feeling. But the three masques to whom we have particularly alluded as witnesses of this scene not only watched it attentively, but likewise penetrated the full depth of its meaning. The reader will have no difficulty in understanding that these were Editha, Gertrude, and Lord Sackville, and the moment the scene itself took place, Editha, separating from the nobleman and her maid, glided up to the spot where her husband and Lady Prescott were standing transfixed, gazing upon each other. Then taking off her mask, Editha suddenly disclosed her countenance to their view.

"Heavens! your wife, my lord!" ejaculated Lady Prescott, now seized with an overwhelming confusion.

"Yes, 'tis I, this false man's wife," said Editha, in a tone which, though low and rapid, was terrible with the accentuation of a bitter malignity. "I have heard and seen enough to understand the intimacy which has sprung up between you. I was close behind you both when first you met ere now. I heard you, my lord, lavish your poetic eloquence upon this woman, and I heard you," she added, bending the lightnings of her eyes upon the almost fainting and utterly bewildered Lady Prescott, "confess that you loved him in return. Oh, it is a joy, it is a pleasure, a perfect paradise of revengeful feeling, to unmask a vile, traitorous

husband such as you, and a base, intriguing courtesan such as you!"

And having thus poured forth the bitterness of her invectives and the lightning of her looks upon the earl and Lady Prescott, Editha resumed her mask, glided up the staircase, and plunged into the saloons, where she was shortly after joined by Sackville and Gertrude, to whom she recounted all she had said to her husband and Lady Prescott.

Almost immediately afterward, Editha and Gertrude took their departure, exulting in the success of the stratagem which had thus led to such a merciless exposure of the Earl of Curzon; and Horace himself did not remain much longer amidst the festive scene, but ordered his own carriage and returned to Carlton House. But was he contented at having met the Countess of Curzon there that night? Assuredly so; because she had given him the fondest assurances that at the earliest opportunity his hopes should be gratified and that she would abandon herself to him.

Oh, these scenes of patrician depravity and aristocratic profligacy! Wherefore do we continue to pen them? Because they are faithful reflections, in the mirror of our narrative, of the vices, immoralities, and crimes of that arrogant, heartless, and unprincipled class.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE FORGED LETTER

The whole scene which took place at the foot of the staircase, as just described, scarcely occupied a couple of minutes, even including the little episode which the sudden appearance of Editha introduced into the drama. While she was pouring forth her bitter invectives and bending the lightnings of her looks upon her husband and Lady Prescott, these two were rendered utterly speechless by the abruptness and also by the nature of the scene. The earl saw in a moment that he was the dupe of a new stratagem on the part of his wife, and that when he assumed the character of the Cavalier so as to personate Lord Sackville, she by some means discovered his intent, and had turned the tables upon him. Thus was it that, through mingled astonishment and mortification, he lost all his presence of mind, and remained with paralyzed faculties, like a guilty man in the presence of a wife who seemed suddenly to acquire the right of performing the part of an outraged woman.

As for Lady Prescott, she had all along believed that she was to meet Lord Curzon, and that he would be in the dress of a Cavalier. The conversation between them had taken a turn which she certainly thought extraordinary; and the reader has seen how strong were her feelings when accused of intriguing with Colonel Malpas, whom she only knew by sight, and with Mr. Emmerson, whom she had never seen in her life. But when the earl had put to her the question concerning her husband, — that husband who had been dead for two years, — it naturally struck the lady that there was either some fearful mistake, or else that she was being made the victim of a wanton insult. Then, as the earl revealed his countenance, she of course was not surprised to behold the

features of this nobleman, because it was precisely he whom she had come thither on purpose to meet, in whose behalf she had really been stricken with a passionate sentiment, and to whom she had freely and intentionally made an avowal of love. Conceive, then, her terror and dismay when, on raising her veil and revealing her own face, she saw in a moment, by his astonishment, that it was not she herself but another whom the earl had come thither to meet; and then, before she was able to regain her composure, up stepped Editha, whom she immediately recognized, to overwhelm her with reproaches. Insulting, cutting, goading as the language was which the Countess of Curzon had addressed to her, how could she possibly feel otherwise than that she deserved it all? No wonder, then, that she cowered beneath the fiery glance and writhed under the torture of the lashing words which Editha poured upon her; no wonder that she was unable to give any reply or attempt a syllable either of bold denial or self-exculpation, in respect to the charges made against her by the indignant countess.

We have paused to chronicle these few explanations in order to fill up any blanks with regard to emotions or incidents that may have occurred in the hasty outline which we sketched of the scene at the foot of the staircase. We now take up the thread of the narrative at the moment when Editha, speeding away from the presence of her husband and Lady Prescott, left them stupefied with what had just occurred, and overwhelmed with confusion. The earl was the first to regain his composure, and, putting on his mask, he said, in a quick tone of excitement, "Resume your veil, dear lady, and let us seek some nook where we can converse together. I will give you the fullest explanations."

Lady Prescott drew down the veil over her countenance, upon the brunette complexion of which sat a deadly pallor; and as she again took the earl's arm, he could feel the glowing volume of her bosom swelling and sinking with tumultuous heavings, like the waves of the sea. After she had drawn down the veil, she cast a terrified look around, as if fearful lest the Countess of Curzon should reappear and commence another scene; but her courage, and therewith her composure, began to revive, when on glancing upon the three or four groups of masques scattered through the spacious hall, she saw by their manner that they had not taken

any particular notice of the scene which had just occurred.

The earl led her again up the staircase, into the drawing-room, and thence they passed into the conservatory, where they found themselves alone.

"Good heavens!" said Lady Prescott, in a voice full of that anguish to which she was now enabled to give free vent, "what a fatal occurrence! Wretched woman that I am! My disgrace will to-morrow be bruited throughout London. How seriously I am compromised with you! But, Curzon," she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting the course of her own ideas, "explain all this! Wherefore write so urgent a letter enjoining me to be here, and then seem surprised that 'tis I whom you have met — "

"My dear creature," interrupted the Earl of Curzon, "I ere now told you that I would give the fullest explanations. Know, then, that I this day intercepted a letter from Lord Sackville to my wife, giving her an appointment at this mansion and specifying not only the dress he would wear but also the pass-words to be used on the occasion. That dress was the costume of a Cavalier; those pass-words are the ones which you and I this night exchanged. You can now understand wherefore I am here disguised in this costume to-night, and whom I really expected to meet."

"Ah! then the letter I have received is a forgery?" ejaculated Lady Prescott; "a vile base forgery? Oh, heavens! how am I covered with ridicule in your eyes! And how shall I be disgraced in the eyes of the world! I am ruined, I am undone; my reputation is gone. The queen will hear of it, and banish me from court — "

"Compose yourself," said Curzon, who experienced some sort of regard, though chiefly based upon sensual passion, for the handsome widow. "All may not turn out so bad as you now apprehend. We will talk upon that subject directly. But tell me, have you that letter about you — "

"Ah! yes, 'tis here," responded Lady Prescott, in a tone indicative of a most mournful sense of humiliation, and thrusting her hand into her bosom, she murmured, "I have the letter, but I dare not show it to you."

Her voice was scarcely audible, influenced as it was by her emotions of mingled anguish and shame, and stifled too as the accents were by the thick veil through which they had

to penetrate; for be it observed that it was in consequence of her voice being thus subdued by the folds of this veil that the earl had ere now (previously to the scene on the staircase) listened to it so long without perceiving that it was not the voice of his countess.

"Yes, you must let me see that note," said the earl, taking her hands and pressing them in his own. "There can now be no secrets between us: we have gone too far to retract. The occurrences of this night have suddenly established between us the intimacy which half a dozen years could scarcely have created under other circumstances. Were this not the case, think you that I would have revealed to your ears the fact that my wife is an intrigante, an accomplished intrigante, an intrigante the strength of whose passions is only equalled by her artifice in ministering to them. To confess myself a cuckold, to avow my knowledge of my own dishonour, to admit that I am duped and deceived, without being able to obtain a single proof against my abandoned wife, — all this is painful and humiliating enough for me. Need you, then, on your part, hesitate to show me that letter?"

"Ah! when it contains avowals and protestations made in your name," said the lady whose voice was still low and tremulous, "which you will perhaps refuse to confirm and sanction?"

"If the letter tells you that you are beautiful and assures you that your charms are great," cried Curzon, "the forger of that letter has only said for me what I am fully prepared to say in my own behalf. Yes, you are handsome, gloriously handsome; and I love you, I love you."

Thus speaking, the earl — having assured himself by means of a rapid glance swept around the conservatory that no observer was nigh — caught Lady Prescott in his arms, tore away the veil from her face, and glued his lips to hers. All the sensual passions of the widow flamed up in a moment, and abandoning herself to the full tide of ecstasy which thrilled through her frame, she vibrated in his arms, supple and elastic as a wanton bayadere craving other joys more replete with frenetic pleasure than even the foretasting raptures of this kiss. Then, as the earl, profiting by the occasion to indulge in amorous dalliance, gently invaded with his hand the treasures of the amorous widow's glowing

bust, he was enabled to help himself to the note which she had hesitated to give him. Drawing it forth from the Elysian temple which had been made its receptacle, and while she herself, blushing and trembling, panting and palpitating, sank upon a seat to adjust her hair and resume her veil, the earl ran his eyes over the contents of the letter:

"Pardon me, dearest lady, for venturing to address you in such terms as these which I am about to adopt, but the good feeling that sprang up between us last evening at Carlton House, the tender nature of the discourse which we held together, and the manner in which you received the little demonstrations of love which the opportunity permitted me to make, all have emboldened me to repeat the avowal of my feelings in far more explicit terms. Although I have had the pleasure of your acquaintance for some few years past, and although I have ever regarded you as one of the handsomest and most accomplished ladies of the day, it was nevertheless reserved until last night for your wit and beauty to assert a sudden but irresistible empire over my heart. This is the truth, the solemn truth, and I implore you to believe me when I declare that last night the influence of your loveliness, your fascinations, and your graces, filled my soul with a boundless admiration. I was smitten with a deathless sentiment. Oh, do not reject my prayer because in the cold formal routine of the world's circumstances I am already married, do not scorn me because my hand is given to another, for my heart was mine own to bestow until last night, and now it is no longer mine — it is yours!

"The prayer that I am about to offer up is that you will grant me a meeting this night, so that I may explain my feelings more fully. The opportunity for such an interview is ready at hand. Lady Wenlock gives a masked ball, to which of course you have received an invitation. May I entreat you to be there to-night soon after nine o'clock? I shall be dressed as a Cavalier, with a small cap of the archer fashion, long ringlets, a velvet doublet, red belt, and yellow buskins. Of course I shall be masked. Be you there, masked or veiled, so that no one may recognize you. That you may incur no danger of compromising yourself by any error or mistake, I propose that you accost me

with some such question as the following: 'Wherefore, brave cavalier, hast thou left thy sword behind thee?' Then if the response be, 'Because I expected to meet a gentle lady,' you will know that you have accosted the right individual, and that 'tis I, your sincere admirer, who will thus have given that answer. Do not fail me then, dearest lady, for I love you most sincerely, most earnestly, and most devotedly, and I would give ten years of my life to possess your love in return. I have a thousand things to say, but must postpone them till to-night.

"Your affectionate

"CURZON."

The reader will of course understand that this was the letter which the Countess of Curzon had written in a hand simulating that of her husband, and which we said at the time was addressed to a certain person. This letter had been delivered by Gertrude at Lady Prescott's town residence, and believing that it really came from the earl himself, she had fallen into the snare so artfully set by the cunning and unprincipled Editha.

"'Tis my wife who has done this," said Curzon. Then, with a concentrated bitterness of look and accent, he observed, "She has completely turned the tables upon me."

"And will she not make all London ring with the story?" asked poor Lady Prescott, with a deep sob.

"It would be wrong, very wrong," said the earl, "were I to attempt to buoy you up with a contrary hope. But if you love me, why not dare all, everything, and become my mistress openly? Were you not already prepared," he inquired, tenderly pressing her in his arms, "to gratify my fondest hopes?"

"Yes," she answered, in a murmuring tone, "but then our amour would have been secret, my reputation would have continued untainted, and if an eligible offer of marriage had presented itself, I might have accepted it."

"True," said the earl, still straining her in his arms, "but circumstances, you perceive, have proved hostile to us, and we must now make the best of them."

"But can you not enter into some arrangement with your wife?" asked Lady Prescott. "Can you not agree upon mutual forgiveness, so that if you overlook her faults she

will wink at your infidelities, the result being that she will keep secret the incidents of this night? "

" Matters have become too serious between her and me," said Lord Curzon, " to admit of a compromise." And still he strained the handsome widow in his arms, once more drawing aside the veil from her countenance and covering her lips and cheeks with kisses.

" But my situation in the royal household," she murmured.

" You are not dependent upon it."

" No, I am rich; but then the honour — "

" Ah! some sacrifices must be at times made to love," whispered the earl, in an endearing tone.

" Yes, I feel that it is so," murmured the amorous widow, in a voice that was languid and almost dying with sensual longings.

A quarter of an hour afterward the Earl of Curzon and Lady Prescott returned from Kew to London together in the same carriage, and the rest of that night they passed in each other's company at Mrs. Gale's fashionable house of accommodation in Soho Square.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE PEARLS

Venetia was somewhat indisposed by the fatigues attendant on the private theatricals, the banquet, and the late hour at which she retired to rest, and she did not quit her chamber during the whole of the day the incidents of which we have detailed in the last few chapters. She gave orders to her faithful Jessica that she wished to be left perfectly tranquil, and not to be persecuted with visits, letters, or messages; and although invited to Lady Wenlock's masked ball, she was compelled to remain absent, so great was the sense of exhaustion which she experienced.

This was the first day that Venetia had passed alone for some time. The reader may be therefore well assured that she had a long communing with herself. She thought of many things, some agreeable, some disagreeable, of gratified ambition on the one hand, and a career of dissipation on the other, of the exalted flight which she had taken up into the aristocratic heaven with a coronet upon her brow, and of the downward plunge which she had likewise made into the vortex of profligacy. But did she repent of the course which she had pursued? And in order to regain her virtue, would she abandon her haughty rank and descend from the pedestal to which the royal hand had raised her? No such thing! The time for such regret was past, nor were there ever such holy lights burning in the sanctuary of her soul as would have served to irradiate a career of immaculate virtue. Within herself, as it were, did she possess the principles of her own moral ruin, the elements of degradation from pristine virtue and innocence. For she had passions to gratify and feelings to minister unto, which in themselves became incompatible with a virtuous career. Being originally so

obscure and entertaining the ambition to rise so highly, how was it possible to attain that object without the sacrifice of virtue? Again, though she had exercised the moral courage as a matter of worldly calculation to remain virtuous until her marriage with Sackville, yet the moment that nuptial knot was tied and she had tasted the joys of love, all the desires that were inherent in her nature flamed up with volcanic ardour, and she became, as it were, a veritable Messalina in a few short months.

Venetia had a generous mind, a large intellectual capacity, a cool judgment, and a quick appreciation of everything that was tasteful, elegant, and refined, and yet her passions, when once the rein was given to them, threatened to plunge her into depravities the grossest and the vilest. How often has it been, — alas, that we should be compelled to chronicle the fact! — that women of the strongest intelligence have proved themselves of the weakest morality, so that some who have wielded the sceptre of a mighty state and kept millions in awe were unable to rule a little rebel passion or triumph over a single provocative desire.

During the current of Venetia's thoughts, there was a subject which intruded itself more than once. This was the fact that out of the six individuals who had originally laid the memorable wager concerning her, four had already revelled in her charms. She was the wife of one, the favourite mistress of another, had fallen into the arms of a third by sheer mistake, and had voluntarily abandoned herself as a paramour to the fourth. Thus Horace Sackville was her husband, the prince regent owned her as his favourite, the Earl of Curzon had passed a night in her arms through the mistake just alluded to, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon had been blessed by the joys of her spontaneous yielding. Of the six personages who had originally laid the memorable wager, the Marquis of Leveson and Colonel Malpas were the only two who had not possessed her, and these two she hated cordially. For the marquis, made up as he was with all kinds of succedaneous materials, appeared in her eyes to be a loathsome monster of feculence and corruption; and Colonel Malpas was a detestable coward, a sneaking, grovelling scoundrel, whose personal beauty could not for a single moment palliate those evil qualities which rendered him an abhorrence to a woman of Venetia's mind and spirit.

We have said that Venetia had chosen to pass the entire day alone. In the evening, as her husband was going to the masked ball, and would therefore not be home till late, she removed from their usual chamber into the elegant seclusion of her own boudoir, and retiring to bed early, she soon fell into a sound and refreshing sleep. Having passed through the wondrous mazes and fanciful intricacies of several pleasant dreams, a shadow appeared all on a sudden to fall upon the sunlight of her thoughts, and the pleasurable nature of her visions underwent a rapid change, plunging her into the horrors of a nightmare. At length she awoke with a start, and, sitting up in bed, experienced an ineffable sensation of relief on finding herself in her own boudoir instead of the vile den where imagination had just been plunging her. Upon the night-table near the couch burned a silver lamp of exquisite workmanship, and which was fed with a perfumed oil compounded expressly for the use of Carlton House. On the larger table, which stood in the middle of the room, were several letters, together with an object which appeared to Venetia's eyes to be a jewel-case.

"Jessica has placed upon that table all the missives which have arrived to-day," thought Venetia to herself. Then consulting a watch which she took from beneath her pillow, she found that it was just midnight.

Only midnight, and she had slept so soundly that she felt fully awake, without the slightest inclination to slumber again. The idea struck her that she would at least ascertain what that jewel-case meant, even if she did not examine her correspondence. Stepping therefore from the couch, her naked feet and ankles tripping glancingly in the dazzling polish of their whiteness and firmness upon the rich carpet, and with the drapery hanging so negligently about her form that all the richness and grandeur of its luxuriant but firm proportions were displayed, she approached the table, opened the jewel-case, and found that it contained a magnificent string of pearls of the largest size she had ever seen. But from whom did this gift come? If the prince were the donor, he would have presented them with his own hand, as was his invariable custom. The pearls therefore assuredly came not from his Royal Highness. There was no note, or card, or any written intimation inside the box, or fastened to it, to aid Venetia in her conjectures. Her curiosity was

now piqued, for the pearls seemed to be of that costly nature which denoted some liberal and most probably wealthy donor, and she was naturally anxious to learn who the individual could be. At least thirty letters lay upon the table; doubtless amongst them would she find one clearing up the mystery. She therefore took all the letters, together with the case of pearls, in her hands, and tripped back to her couch.

But before she opened a single letter Venetia could not resist the temptation of placing the string of pearls upon the rich masses of her auburn hair and then surveying herself in a little toilet hand-mirror which lay on the table close by. It was one of those involuntary acts of vanity of which even the most intellectual women are capable, and to which all beautiful females are impelled, as it were, by the very consciousness of beauty. Venetia saw that the pearls became her admirably, and that though her hair was negligently tied up, its shining luxuriance set off those ornaments to their utmost advantage. But a smile of sweet triumph played upon her coral lips as the thought struck her that it was her hair which set off the exquisite beauty of the pearls, rather than the pearls setting off the glossy glory of those silken masses.

But while that smile was still lingering upon her lips, revealing pearls as pure, as white, and as even as the string which now rested upon her head, the feeling of curiosity to ascertain who sent the gift sprang up with additional force, and flinging down the mirror, she began opening the letters one after another. Hastily glancing at the name of each writer, so as to form an idea of the contents, she disposed of the epistles and notes with a running commentary uttered audibly and in a musing tone.

"An invitation to the Duchess of Darlington's for next Monday evening. And how very courteously worded! — 'Dearest Lady Sackville.' I remember that when I was yet plain Venetia Trelawney, my carriage one day accidentally came in contact with that of the magnificent duchess, through the carelessness of her own coachman, when she gave me a look which said as plainly as ever eyes yet spoke, 'I wonder who this creature is whose carriage comes within even a dozen yards of mine!' And now she is ready to kiss the ground upon which I tread. Ah! here is a letter from

Mrs. Fitzherbert, demanding more places and pensions for her relatives and friends. And here is a note from Miss Bathurst, stating that as she could not see me to-day when she called, she has written to remind me that I must procure the vacant bishopric for her cousin the dean, and a baronetcy for his second brother the admiral, and a pension for his other brother the great banker who has failed. Well," continued Venetia, with a sigh, " all this must be done, but really these people are insatiable. Day after day, nothing but places, pensions, sinecures, emoluments, and honours, for this cormorant horde of Fitzherberts, Bathursts, and all their relatives, to even the hundredth remove. But, ah! what says Miss Bathurst here in a postscript? — that Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot must positively be provided for immediately, that the mother is anxious to become bedchamber woman in the household of the queen or Princess Charlotte, and that Penelope is resolved to be nothing less than a maid of honour. Well, again I say it must all be done. Here is another invitation — and another — and another — and another," continued Venetia, opening letter after letter and tossing them away as soon as glanced at. " Ah! what is this? " and her countenance assumed a different look as she opened a letter signed by Jocelyn Loftus.

This was not a letter to be either disposed of with a satirical comment, or to be tossed aside to be perused at leisure. But it was a letter the contents of which seemed to be as serious as they were lengthy, for as Venetia continued the perusal her look became more solemn, until it deepened into sorrowfulness; then on the lashes of each eye slowly glimmered forth a tear, and presently those crystal drops rolled down the lady's cheeks, shining in their pearly path like twin drops of dew.

Presently a profound sob rose slowly from Venetia's bosom, which it convulsed with a great heaving, and then, as she listlessly held the letter in her hand, when its perusal was ended, she murmured to herself, " Perhaps it is better thus, after all! "

But, oh, it was now a mockery, a painful mockery, for Venetia, humbled, sorrowful, and tearful as she was, to retain those dazzling pearls upon her brow. But, heavens! the pearls were as completely forgotten at this moment as if there were no such things in the world, and there she sat, on

her elegant couch, with the ornaments on her hair and the tears in her eyes, a touching monument of the moral that the symbols of triumph and of sorrow, of worldly pride and of heartfelt pain, are singularly united in the destiny of mortals.

At length, slowly awakening from that painful reverie, Venetia folded up the letter which had produced such a change in her mood, and carefully deposited it under her pillow. Then, as her eyes fell upon the jewel-case, the gift of the pearls was suddenly recalled to her memory, and snatching them from her head, she flung them with a sort of frenzied impetuosity across the room, exclaiming, "Begone! in this moment of my deep humiliation, thou seemest a mockery and a reproach."

She then slowly reclined her head upon her pillow, and gave way to the train of thoughts which the letter from Jocelyn Loftus had conjured up. Sleep gradually stole upon her eyes, and her sorrowful feelings, whatever their nature might have been, were soon steeped in oblivion.

At nine o'clock on the following morning Jessica softly and slowly stole into the room. Her mistress was still sleeping, the cheeks gently flushed as if with the soft excitement of some vision, her head resting upon one naked arm plump to the eye and brilliant in its alabaster fairness, while the lips, slightly apart, revealed the pearls within that mouth which seemed formed only to breathe the most fragrant sweets or to receive the delicious kisses of love. Stealthily, for fear of awakening her, was Jessica about to retire from the boudoir so as to allow her mistress to sleep on, when she suddenly beheld the string of pearls lying upon the carpet. She stooped down and picked them up, and while she was contemplating them with admiration, Venetia awoke.

"What a splendid gift, my lady!" exclaimed the abigail. "Might I inquire from whom it comes?"

"I know not," answered Venetia. "Was there any letter accompanying the jewel-case that contained the pearls?"

"To be sure, my lady," returned Jessica. "The hall porter gave both the case and the letter to me last night, and I brought them into the boudoir along with all the other correspondence which had arrived for your ladyship during the day. I stole in while you slept."

"Yes, I awoke in the middle of the night," observed

Venetia, " and found all those letters upon the table. Some of them I opened, as you perceive; others I left until to-day," she added, a shade appearing upon her countenance as she recollected how the examination of her correspondence had been interrupted by the painful reflections springing from the perusal of Jocelyn's letter.

" Something has occurred to annoy your ladyship? " said Jessica, immediately observing the altered countenance of her mistress.

" Yes, amongst those letters there was one which saddened and perplexed me cruelly," answered Venetia. " But no matter. After all, perhaps, 'tis as well that this discovery should have been made at once," she added, in a musing tone. Then suddenly brightening up, she proceeded to open the letters that remained as yet unread from the previous night's examination. " What astounding impudence! " she suddenly cried, as her looks settled in astonishment upon the signature of one of the letters. " But is it possible that the pearls were sent by him? "

" To whom does your ladyship allude? " asked Jessica.

" To the Marquis of Leveson," was the response, and Venetia proceeded to run her eyes over the letter which she held in her hand and the contents of which were as follows:

" Leveson House, December 11, 1814.

" The Marquis of Leveson presents his most respectful regards to Lady Sackville, and begs her acceptance of the trifle accompanying this note. The marquis is well aware that it is an act of great presumption and boldness on his part thus to intrude himself, even for a single instant, upon the notice of Lady Sackville, but inasmuch as he strives to address her in the profoundest humility and with every feeling of respect, he ventures to hope that Lady Sackville will accord him a full and complete pardon for the past. The marquis is profoundly grieved at having so deeply incurred the displeasure of Lady Sackville, and while he is resolved most faithfully and honourably to fulfil the compact so recently entered into with her ladyship, through the medium of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, he believes and hopes that it is no infringement of that compact thus to lay his homage at the feet of Lady Sackville, and beseech her forgiveness for all bygone offences.

"To prove that the Marquis of Leveson is unfeignedly sincere in his desire to enter into the good graces of Lady Sackville, and that he would gladly and joyously seek any opportunity to manifest his friendship and his respectful devotion toward her ladyship, he begs to state that the hundred pearls now sent to Lady Sackville represent as many thousand pounds, and if Lady Sackville would so far forget her antipathy toward the Marquis of Leveson as to grant him an interview, he would explain in a few words how the accompanying string of pearls can possibly be of such pecuniary value to her ladyship."

"What on earth can the drivelling old idiot mean?" exclaimed Venetia, too much amazed to be indignant. Then having handed the letter to Jessica, she inquired, after a pause, "Can you understand what he aims at?"

"There is some artifice concealed beneath this appearance of profound respect," observed Jessica, "but if I were your ladyship I would see the marquis and ascertain what his real meaning can be. It would appear at first sight as if, in some way or another, he was offering your ladyship a hundred thousand pounds, for, as he says, there are a hundred pearls upon this string, and the letter declares that each one is worth a thousand. How he can make this out, I do not understand, because, beautiful as the pearls may be, they are worth at the outside but a few hundreds — "

"Oh, if he think to purchase my favours with even a hundred thousand pounds," exclaimed Venetia, the glow of triumph suffusing her countenance, and her lips curling haughtily at the same time, "he is much mistaken. What! I, young, rich, and beautiful as I am, to abandon myself to such a loathsome mass of corruption as that man! No, no, ten thousand times no! But nevertheless, for the sake of gratifying my curiosity, I will see him in order to ascertain what he means. Go you, Jessica, to Leveson House, see the marquis yourself, and tell him that he may call upon me at midday precisely. I will not write a line to him, nor will I send a message by any save a confidential person such as you, for the marquis shall never have reason to boast of my favours and the world shall never have the slightest pretence for saying that Lady Sackville surrendered herself to such a superannuated sensualist. Those admirers on whom I do

bestow my favours must be the young, the handsome, and the attractive, not the old, the ugly, and the repulsive. 'Tis sufficient," she murmured to herself, " to be compelled to submit to the embraces of a horrid sensualist such as the prince."

Jessica hastened away to Leveson House, obtained an interview with the marquis, and delivered the message from Venetia. The nobleman was scarcely able to conceal the delight which he experienced at a result that he had evidently hardly ventured to anticipate, and in his joy he thrust a bank-note for twenty guineas into Jessica's hands. The abigail, charmed with this munificence, returned to Carlton House, saying to herself, " After all, Lord Leveson is not such a very nasty-looking man, and if I were in her ladyship's place — But no matter. I dare say it will end as his lordship wishes, for that he does hope and expect to win her ladyship is evident enough."

Punctual at the appointed hour the Marquis of Leveson made his appearance at Carlton House, and was conducted to the drawing-room where Venetia, attired in an elegant morning dress, was waiting to receive him. Rising from her seat in a manner coldly courteous, she saluted him with a formal inclination of her head, and slightly indicating a chair, she resumed her own place on the sofa. The marquis, whose looks and bearing indicated the most respectful admiration, took the seat thus formally offered him, and, with the courteous ease of polished breeding, he said, " May I flatter myself that your ladyship has deigned to forgive me for the past? "

" There are insults and outrages," replied Venetia, coldly, " which cannot be consigned to oblivion. At the same time they may be so far pardoned as to permit the individuals themselves to meet in society and exchange the usual courtesies of acquaintanceship."

" To be restored to your ladyship's favour on any terms will prove an indescribable relief to my feelings," said the marquis, with a low bow and a half-smile.

" I now await," observed Venetia, with a slight curling of the lip and elevation of the head, as much as to imply that she would not condescend to take notice of the remark the nobleman had just made and in which he had chosen to assume that he was restored to her favour, " I am awaiting the

explanation of a certain passage in your lordship's letter, relative to these trinkets," and she pointed toward the pearls which lay in the jewel-case upon the table.

" The passage was doubtless ambiguous to your ladyship," said the marquis, " and I purposely left it so, inasmuch as a full explanation of my meaning, if unasked and uninvited by you, might be construed into a breach of the compact entered into between us the other day under such peculiar circumstances at my house."

" Proceed, my lord," said Venetia, in a tone of mild command, " and give me your explanation without any further preface."

" Then, of whatever nature this explanation may be," said the marquis, inquiringly, " you grant me full permission beforehand to offer it? And you will not hold whatever I may say to be a violation of the future line of conduct enjoined to me on your behalf by Sir Douglas Huntingdon? "

" I give your lordship free permission to speak plainly," answered Venetia. " But understand me well, it is curiosity, and curiosity alone, which prompted me to grant this interview, and now induces me to listen to the explanation which your lordship may have to give."

" I am honoured and delighted by being admitted to your ladyship's presence on any terms," responded the Marquis of Leveson, with another low bow. Then, taking the string of pearls from the table, he said, " Your ladyship has recently entered upon a career the most brilliant, the most triumphant, and the most resplendent, but you will find that it is the most costly and the most expensive. The sources of your income must necessarily be limited to certain bounds, but, on the other hand, boundless will be the constantly recurring drains made in a thousand ways upon your purse. Forgive me for thus turning the discourse upon so vile a subject as money. My experience in the world is greater than yours, and you will soon find that my words are true. Therefore is it that I propose to constitute myself your banker in reserve, when your regular banker shall be overdrawn. Here are a hundred pearls upon this string, and each one, when presented to me by your own hand, shall be considered equivalent to a cheque or draft for a thousand pounds. You may present them singly, or as many as you like at a time, or all at the same moment if you choose, and

the demand shall be duly honoured. I thus open for your ladyship's use a credit, as your banker in reserve, for one hundred thousand pounds."

"And what condition is attached to this unheard-of munificence?" asked Venetia, with a satirical smile, "for I am well aware that your lordship is playing the usurer with me in one way or another."

"Yes, frankly I admit that it is so," replied the Marquis of Leveson. "I am purposely, seriously, and deliberately laying out my money at a satisfactory interest."

"And that interest?" said Venetia, interrogatively.

"Your love," rejoined the marquis, gazing at her fixedly in the face, in order to observe how she would take the answer just given.

"My love?" she echoed, with a voice and look which showed that she had anticipated the reply. "I am certainly flattered at the high value you set upon it. But do you really propose to purchase what you term my love for one hundred thousand pounds?"

"Let not such a word as purchase pass between us," said the nobleman. "In a spirit of speculative friendship, I open to you a credit on my purse to the amount named, with the understanding that on that day and in that hour when you shall present the last pearl of the hundred upon this string, you will not retreat from my arms when I fling them around your neck and say, 'Venetia, you are mine!'"

"You have now proved yourself explicit indeed," observed Lady Sackville. "I will not be angry with you, nor will I ridicule you for the proposal you have made. Nor shall I return the pearls —"

"Ah!" ejaculated the marquis, in a subdued tone of triumph, "then you consent to the proposition?"

"I consent to it thus far," returned Venetia, rising from her seat, "that if I ever do present these symbolic cheques upon you, my self-constituted banker in reserve, I shall consider myself bound by the most solemn and sacred ties of honour to pay you the interest for which you have stipulated. But believe me, my lord," she added, with a smile most sweetly wicked and ravishingly malicious as it revealed her ivory teeth, "believe me, my lord, when I assure you that these pearls, so far from ever returning into your hands, will be retained in my jewel-coffer as a proof that under no

possible circumstances could Lady Sackville dream of selling herself to the Marquis of Leveson."

"We shall see," said the nobleman, with a low bow.

"Yes, we shall see," answered Venetia, with a cold and reserved salutation.

The Marquis of Leveson then took his departure, well pleased with the result of his interview, and confident of beholding the success of his extraordinary proceeding at no very distant date.

Immediately on his return to Albemarle Street he sent his confidential valet Brockman in search of Captain Tash, and in the course of the day the redoubtable officer was discovered in the act of chastising, or what he called "administering the bastinado" to the keeper of an eating-house for having kept him waiting five minutes past the hour at which his dinner was ordered to be ready. The man Robin had shrunk into a corner of the room, where he was endeavouring to contract himself into as small a space as possible; and as for the eating-house keeper himself, he was receiving the captain's blows with as much meekness as possible, seeing that the gallant officer, who for some months past had been in possession of ample funds, was one of his best customers. The entrance of Brockman put an end to the scene, and Captain Tash, followed by his man Robin, hastened to accompany the valet to Albemarle Street. The captain was there introduced into Leveson House, while Robin remained standing bolt upright against a lamp-post at a little distance.

"Now, my good fellow," said the marquis, when the captain and he were alone together, "I wish you to do me a service, in which there is money to be earned. I need not ask whether you are acquainted with Lord and Lady Sackville, for well do I remember the part which you played in their behalf at Colonel Malpas's house a couple of months ago. What I require you to do is to throw yourself in Lord Sackville's way, to insinuate yourself into his confidence, to obtain a hold upon him, to make yourself necessary to him, to lead him into all kinds of pleasures and dissipations, to induce him to gamble, — in a word, to plunge him into every species of extravagance. Find out jewellers, horse-dealers, and all kinds of persons who will give him credit, but no bill-discounters to lend him money to pay the liabilities which he may thus contract. I wish you, Captain Tash,"

continued the marquis, " to do everything to render Lord Sackville extravagant and a spendthrift, for I have a particular object to serve, which it is not necessary to explain to you, but which can only be carried out by plunging Sackville into debts and difficulties. And mind, if you can succeed in doing all this, never fail to urge him to apply to his wife for money when he wants it. Let him be importunate, too, with her, for she can and she must find him the means to gratify his extravagances, so that you must not allow him to take any refusal from her. Come to me from time to time, not only to report progress, but also to receive such recompense as I may consider you to deserve. There are a hundred guineas as an earnest of my liberality. So, to work at once, and let not the grass grow underneath your feet."

Captain Tash readily undertook a commission which promised to be so lucrative, and making his bow to the marquis he strode forth from Leveson House with such an awful swagger in his gait, and with his huge hat stuck so much on one side, that even his man Robin was astounded at the demeanour of his master.

" Follow me, my good and faithful servant," said Tash, with the air of a king addressing a subject.

" Where to? " asked Robin, shrinking back as if he were about to condense himself into the thinness of the lamp-post against which he had been planted.

" Where to? " ejaculated Tash, with inconceivable magnificence of look, " why, to Carlton House, to be sure! " and giving his huge life-preserver a terrific thump upon the pavement, he turned and walked along with so grand an air that a stranger would have thought all Albemarle Street belonged to him.

" Well, I wonder what is in the wind now," said Robin to himself as he sneaked stealthily along at a humble distance behind his master, like a spaniel at the heels of a bulldog.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE FIVE THOUSAND GUINEAS

The reader will be kind enough to remember that Mr. Emmerson wrote a letter to the Countess of Curzon beseeching an early interview with her, inasmuch as he had a certain communication to make relative to Colonel Malpas. Now, as Editha well knew that this letter had passed through her husband's hands and had of course been read by him, she was not imprudent enough either to call upon the money-broker at his office, or give him any appointment elsewhere. But she sent her faithful confidante Gertrude to explain to him how his letter had been intercepted by her husband and read by him before it reached her hands.

The astute and sharp-witted abigail proceeded to acquit herself of this commission, and repairing to Nicholas Lane at about eleven o'clock in the forenoon of the day following the memorable incidents at Lady Wenlock's, she obtained an immediate interview with Mr. Emmerson. This took place in his own private room, but Theodore Varian, who was listening at the door the whole time, overheard everything that passed between his master and Gertrude.

"What on earth could have thus suddenly raised the suspicion of his lordship?" exclaimed the bill-broker, in mingled astonishment and dismay, when Gertrude had delivered to him the message of the countess.

"I know not, sir," responded the abigail, "or, rather, I should observe that it is perfectly intelligible how his lordship's suspicions are always excited now, relative to her ladyship, since that terrible night when I had to lower myself from the window in Grosvenor Street, and hasten to Soho Square to warn her ladyship and you of what was going on."

"To be sure!" observed Emmerson, much bewildered and trembling all over. "As you say, it is natural indeed that his lordship's suspicions should always be awake. But what will be the result of all this? I tremble to think of it. There will be actions for crim. con., exposure, damages, and so forth."

"Mr. Emmerson, I am ashamed of you," said Gertrude, with indignation. "I did not come hither to hear you whine and pine on your own account, but to listen to what you have to say relative to Colonel Malpas."

"Ah! the villain," cried Emmerson, "he has written me a long letter, explaining his position. He says that I have been the means of ruining him by locking him up in gaol, that his creditors have seized all his furniture and plate, and sold off everything at his house, and that his wife has gone back to her relations, who will not do anything for him. He says also that he has four courses left open for adoption: one is to commit suicide, which he does not admire; the second is to stay in prison all his life, which he does not fancy; the third is to go to the Insolvents' Court, from which he would be certain to be sent back; and the fourth is to turn rogue and rascal in right down earnest, so as to liberate himself in spite of all consequences. This last course is the one he proposes to adopt, and what do you think he means?"

"I really cannot tell," answered Gertrude. "Pray explain."

"With all the cool impudence and brazen effrontery imaginable," continued Emmerson, "he assures me in his letter that unless I choose to liberate him from the King's Bench he shall send and inform the Countess of Curzon that he will make public all the particulars of his amour with her —"

"The villain!" ejaculated Gertrude, her whole frame trembling with indignation, for we have already said that she was accustomed to identify herself with the interests of her much-loved mistress. "But what could he mean by thus writing to you his threats relative to the countess? Does he suspect that there is anything between her ladyship and yourself?"

"I fear so," responded Emmerson. "He is very sharp, as all such rascals are. Remember, since you are acquainted with everything that regards your mistress, it was at Mrs.

Gale's that I overheard the conversation between Malpas and the countess."

"Yes, yes," observed Gertrude, impatiently, "it was concerning the forged bills. You were introduced into the house and placed in an adjacent room that night by Malpas himself."

"And since then Malpas has doubtless heard, although he be in prison," resumed the bill-broker, "that I have visited at Lady Lechmere's and have become to a certain degree intimate with Lady Curzon. Think you, then, that a cunning fellow like Malpas will not suspect how it was that I thus became a visitor at Lady Lechmere's? Will he not put two and two together? Does he not know full well the services which Lady Lechmere has been in the habit of rendering the countess? And will he not now naturally suppose that I have been introduced thither in order that the same services may be rendered for the advantage of the countess and myself? Besides, if once his suspicions in that respect were aroused, he would have thought nothing of employing a spy to watch the movements of myself and Editha; or, intimate as he is with Mrs. Gale, he may have heard from her lips — "

"Yes, I see that there are a hundred ways in which Colonel Malpas may have been led to suspect your intimacy with her ladyship, and we will take it for granted that he does so. Now tell me precisely what it is he threatens."

"That he will apply to Lady Curzon to use her influence with me to liberate him, and if she will not consent, that he will expose her in every way, — 'and in more ways,' he says, with a diabolical ambiguity, 'than she dreams of.' Now, then, you know the worst. What is to be done?"

"What is to be done?" exclaimed Gertrude. "How can you ask me such a question? There is but one course, and that is to stop his mouth by yielding instantaneous compliance with his demands. In a word, give him his liberty."

"Most assuredly, if your mistress shall desire it," said Emmerson. "But recollect that by thus showing myself frightened at his menaces, I shall, as it were, be admitting that I myself have something to fear from his threatened exposure of her ladyship. He will be led to practise further extortions, he will become a tyrant over us — "

"It cannot be helped," interrupted Gertrude, impatiently.

"We must think only of to-day, and wait till to-morrow comes before we trouble ourselves concerning the cares it may bring. But have you anything better to propose? You seem to be reflecting — "

"Yes, I was thinking whether it would not be much more prudent," said Emmerson, "if I were to ride it with a high hand toward Malpas and refer him entirely to the countess. Then her ladyship might send him over the money (with which, of course, I should provide her) to free himself from prison by these means. There would thus be an avoidance of anything like an admission of an amour between myself and her ladyship. Such a precaution would leave no room for future menaces on the part of Malpas with respect to the countess and me."

"I understand you perfectly well," said Gertrude, with a peculiar smile, "and I approve of your suggestions. But whatever is to be done, let it be done quickly, because the countess will be in a painful state of suspense until I return."

"We will arrange the proceeding offhand," said Emmerson. "In the first place, see what I shall write to Malpas."

The money-broker accordingly sat down and penned the following letter:

"Nicholas Lane, December 12, 1814.

"Mr. Emmerson presents his compliments to Colonel Malpas and begs to inform him that he has received with mingled astonishment and indignation the letter which Colonel Malpas has written, and in which certain threats are contained relative to a lady whose name Mr. Emmerson forbears from mentioning. Mr. Emmerson is but slightly acquainted with that lady, and under ordinary circumstances he should decline being the means of conveying to her ladyship any such unmanly threats. But inasmuch as he has previously had to arrange a very unpleasant affair relative to certain bills of exchange wherein Colonel Malpas and the lady aforesaid were engaged, he will once again so far intrude upon that lady's notice as to make her acquainted with the new dangers that now menace her from her unfortunate acquaintance with such a man as Colonel Malpas."

"That will do excellently," said Gertrude. "Coward, poltroon, and unprincipled scoundrel though he be, he would

not, for his own sake, show such a letter as that to anybody. And now, what is the next step? " she inquired.

" The next step," answered Emmerson, " is for me to provide five thousand guineas, which Lady Curzon will have to send over to Colonel Malpas with some appropriate letter which she will know full well how to write in the proper spirit; and as he will have to pay that amount to my solicitor in order to release himself, the money will come back to me again in the course of a few days, and therefore it will be all the same in the end. Let me see," added Emmerson, consulting his watch, " it is now half-past eleven. Hasten you back to Grosvenor Street, explain everything to the countess, and let her have the note ready written for Colonel Malpas. I will send up the money at three o'clock. It must be in notes and gold, and not in a cheque, because of course Colonel Malpas is not to know from whom her ladyship receives it."

" But for Heaven's sake," cried Gertrude, " take care how you send the money. Remember that his lordship the earl may open any letter or parcel addressed to the countess — "

" True! " ejaculated Emmerson. Then, after a few moments' reflection, he said, " Be you on the lookout precisely as the clock strikes three, and I will either call myself or else send some confidential person to Grosvenor Street with a parcel directed to her ladyship. The amount shall all be in notes, so that if I send, the messenger will not know what it contains."

" At three o'clock precisely, then, either yourself or some one on your behalf will call," said Gertrude. " It is not likely that I shall have an opportunity of waiting about in the hall, but the parcel can be given to the hall porter, and all will be right."

With this understanding Gertrude and the money-broker separated. But we need hardly observe that at the moment when Theodore Varian heard the lady's-maid taking leave of his employer, he retreated rapidly from the door at which he had been listening, and resumed his seat on the high stool at the desk, where he appeared to be writing away with as much earnestness as if he had not for a single moment interrupted his own labours or diverted his attention to any other object.

Shortly after Gertrude's departure Mr. Emmerson went

out to procure the money which he had to send to the Countess of Curzon. He had not so much in his banker's hands, for, in fact, he had overdrawn considerably of late in order to minister to her extravagances, as we have already informed the reader. But he had plenty of other resources, and had no fear of experiencing any difficulty in obtaining the amount by the hour named.

Meantime, the instant the money-broker went out, Theodore Varian penned the following note to the Earl of Curzon:

"At three o'clock to-day a parcel containing bank-notes to the amount of five thousand guineas, and addressed to the countess, will be left at your lordship's house. The sum is intended to be sent over to the King's Bench to release Colonel Malpas from prison. The parcel will either be given into the hands of Gertrude, or of the hall porter, and to no one else.

"Your lordship's humble servant,

"T. V."

In about half an hour the office-boy, who had been upon some errand, returned, and Varian then had an opportunity of slipping out for a few minutes. Giving the note to a ticket-porter, he charged him to repair with all possible speed to Grosvenor Street and deliver it into the hands of the Earl of Curzon himself. The messenger hurried away to execute his commission, and Theodore returned into the office, chuckling at the incident which had thus transpired to gratify his vindictive feelings toward Emmerson.

In the meantime Gertrude had retraced her way to Grosvenor Street and had communicated to the countess everything that had taken place in Nicholas Lane.

"With all his infatuation for me," said Editha, in a tone of mingled spite and disgust, "this money-making citizen is particularly careful of his own personal interest and safety. He will not compromise himself in any way with Colonel Malpas, but he will allow me to be made the catspaw and tool in the matter."

"My dear lady," said Gertrude, "I saw through the money-broker's meaning all the time. In fact, his artifice is covered with a veil so exceedingly flimsy that it would be impossible not to penetrate it at once. But I appeared

to give it my most cordial approval; and I did approve of it in reality, for, to please me, Mr. Emmerson cannot possibly be too guarded in respect to his connection with your ladyship. I should be sorry indeed if any suspicions which even such a man as Colonel Malpas may have entertained in this respect were confirmed, and I am truly glad that they will now be quite set at rest by the letter which Mr. Emmerson has written."

"I understand you, Gertrude," said Editha. "The fact is, this amour of mine with the stock-broker is one little creditable to me and of which I have no reason to be proud. But you know that it was one entirely of convenience. Embarrassed as I have been for money, I should not have known what to do without him."

"That is all well and good, my lady," said the girl, "and I do not blame you for having formed the connection. I was only saying that I was glad when Mr. Emmerson of his own accord proposed a plan which was at once calculated to give the lie to Malpas's suspicions."

"To be sure; you have taken the proper view of the case," said Editha. "And now for the note which I am to write to the colonel. Give me my desk. But I know not how I shall acquit myself of so unpleasant a task."

Editha made several beginnings, but tore up sheet after sheet of paper, and it was not until she had made at least a dozen attempts that she could achieve anything calculated to satisfy herself. At length she finished the following epistle:

"One who has every reason to regret that she ever knew you, much more that she ever loved you, has just received another proof of that cowardly selfishness which prompts you to sacrifice the most sacred ties to your own immediate interests. From a gentleman in the City, to whose generous forbearance both you and I were largely indebted on a certain occasion, I have received an intimation of the menaces which you have thought fit to hold out concerning me. Were I of your own sex and subjected to only one-hundredth part of this crowning insult, I should wreak a fearful vengeance upon you, but being a defenceless, frail, and erring woman, I have deemed it more prudent to succumb to the cruel extortioner. That extortioner is yourself, and herewith I enclose you bank-notes to the amount of five thousand

guineas, for which sum I am indebted to the kindness of my sisters, who with some little difficulty have made up the amount at so short a notice. Accept it, then, liberate yourself, and trouble me no more. Infamous beyond all known infamy would your conduct be, dastardly beyond any cowardice which the world has yet seen, were you to make me henceforth the object of your persecutions. Surely you will appreciate how different is the treatment you receive at my hands from that which is shown toward you by your creditor, Mr. Emmerson. He will not grant you your release without the payment of the uttermost farthing, whereas I, whom you have so cruelly, cruelly outraged, and whose weakness you so basely exposed to that very man, I am now doing everything for you. If, then, there be a spark of generous feeling left in your soul, forbear henceforth from persecuting me."

"Do you approve of this, Gertrude?" inquired Editha, who liked to flatter her faithful dependent by seeming to consult her on all occasions.

"Nothing can be better, my lady," was the response, after Gertrude had read the letter. "It is now half-past one o'clock, and the money is to be here at three. The earl has not come home yet."

"Is it not most absurd and anomalous," exclaimed Editha, "that a husband may absent himself from home all night and sleep where he chooses, whereas the wife can scarcely stir abroad even in the daytime without being watched and espied? No doubt but that my precious husband has passed the night in the arms of his new flame, Lady Prescott. But, thank heavens! I am not jealous. What a happiness it would be if the earl were not jealous of me!"

"After all," observed Gertrude, "the equivoques, the freaks, the stratagems, and the artifices to which that jealousy on his part has compelled us to have recourse constitute a rare sport and sustain an agreeable excitement. At the same time, your ladyship must really be more prudent. But — ah! that double knock at the door is the earl's! His lordship has just come home. I wonder whether he will say anything to your ladyship when you meet relative to the ludicrous exposures of last night."

"No," observed Editha, "he will doubtless appear just as if nothing at all particular had taken place. But you had

better go at once, Gertrude, and tell the hall porter to receive the parcel when it comes and keep it until he sees you again. He must be sure and not allow anybody to catch sight of it."

"Trust to me," said Gertrude, and she hastened from the apartment.

Meantime the Earl of Curzon had just returned home, after having passed the night and the whole of the forenoon in the arms of Lady Prescott at Mrs. Gale's fashionable house of accommodation. Upon entering the hall, his lordship received the note which Theodore Varian had sent him, and immediately comprehending whose name the initials were intended to represent, and from what quarter the money was therefore coming, the earl was not slow in making up his mind that such an amount, if he once succeeded in getting possession of it, should be considered his own lawful booty. He therefore stationed himself at the dining-room window, in order to observe all arrivals at the front door.

Slowly passed the time, but at length the earl's watch showed him that it was close upon three o'clock. And now, concealed behind the curtain, he kept his eyes intently fixed upon the front door-steps. In a few minutes a well-dressed person passed in front of the house, drew a brown paper parcel from his pocket, and having consulted the direction, looked at the number on the front door, evidently to assure himself that it was the right house. Immediately afterward he ascended the steps, and the porter, who, having been duly instructed by Gertrude, was on the watch at the hall window, opened the door before the visitor had time to knock. This individual, who was a friend of Emmerson's, instantaneously delivered the parcel into the porter's hands, and took his hurried departure without uttering a word.

The porter closed the front door, and thrust the parcel into the capacious pocket of his scarlet livery-coat. At the same moment Gertrude came flitting down the stairs and the Earl of Curzon issued forth from the dining-room. For an instant the lady's-maid stopped short, and hung back on the staircase, in the hope that the earl would pass on his way and leave the coast clear for her to receive the parcel from the hands of the porter. But, to the ineffable dismay of Gertrude, the nobleman walked straight across the hall

to where the porter had just resumed his seat in his great leathern chair.

"Was the parcel for me that just arrived?" demanded the earl, and the words struck like the knell of doom, not only upon the ears of Gertrude, but likewise on those of the unhappy Editha, who was anxiously listening on the landing above.

"Eh, what, my lord?" stammered the hall porter, suddenly turning as crimson as his coat and then as white as his neckcloth.

"I spoke plain enough, fellow," exclaimed the earl, in a stern voice. "That parcel which came a moment ago, was it for me, I say? — because I was expecting one."

"No, my lord — it was — it was — that is to say — I mean," stammered the porter, not knowing what to do, and glancing uneasily from the earl before him to Gertrude on the stairs, then back to the earl again.

"Show me that parcel immediately," said the nobleman, in a quick voice and with imperious manner. "Come, be prompt, give it me at once."

"But, my lord —"

"Silence, sirrah!"

"The parcel was not for your lordship," urged the porter.

"Give it to me, I say!" thundered the earl, as he grasped the miserable wretch by the collar.

The porter accordingly at once produced the brown paper packet, but fleet as an arrow did Gertrude bound from the stairs on which she had been hitherto transfixed, and, utterly losing all her presence of mind, she screamed, in wild, hysterical accents, "No, no, it belongs to my mistress!"

But the Earl of Curzon gave a triumphant laugh as he seized the packet from the hand of the astounded hall porter, and Editha, on hearing all that thus took place, rushed down the stairs in an agony of mind more easily conceived than described.

At this moment the earl was the only one who retained anything bordering on presence of mind, and, anxious to avoid a further scene in the hall, which might end by reaching the ears of the entire household, he at once hurried back into the dining-room, closely followed by the countess and Gertrude.

"Your lordship will please to observe to whom that parcel

is addressed," at once began Editha, a dead pallor appearing beneath the transparent duskiness of her complexion, and her entire frame quivering like a harp-string.

" Yes," said the earl, with a smile of satanic triumph, " it is addressed to her ladyship the Countess of Curzon."

" Then give it to me," said Editha, advancing toward him.

" Softly, softly," he said, waving her back with one hand as he clutched the precious packet with the other. " As your husband, madam, I assert the right of opening this parcel, and that right I intend to exercise."

" You dare not! " said Editha, in a faint and dying voice.

" Behold! " he exclaimed, with sardonic malice in the look that he flung upon his writhing, agonizing wife, and tearing open the parcel, he exclaimed, " Hah! bank-notes, and what a pile of them! Nothing could have arrived more seasonably, for I have a number of pressing debts to pay."

" Good heavens! you do not, you cannot mean that you will appropriate that money? " gasped the wretched Editha, and staggering back, she would have fallen had she not been caught in the arms of Gertrude, who placed her upon the sofa.

" If the money be sent to you," continued the earl, " then it is yours, and whatever is yours is mine. This is the marriage law. But here is a letter enclosed, which will doubtless throw some light on the subject."

The Countess of Curzon, goaded to desperation, sprang to her feet in order to rush upon her husband and tear the letter from his hand, but a vertigo suddenly seized upon her, and she fell back again, not deprived of consciousness, but with a maddening sensation of bewilderment in the brain.

The earl, rejoicing in his wife's agony, the extent of which he failed not to observe, tore open the letter, and in a voice of terrible irony read the following lines:

" I forward you, my adored one, the amount promised, and pray you to lose no time in despatching it to the proper quarter. Gertrude will have explained everything to you, and I am sure you will agree that it is far better for you to appear as the principal agent in this matter than for me to yield to the villain's threats. Yours ever affectionately."

" No name, eh? " exclaimed the earl. " But there is no difficulty in guessing who is the writer. In fact, I know

Emmerson's penmanship well enough. But let us see how much we have here. One — two — three — four — " and he went on counting the bank-notes, each for one hundred pounds, until at length he exclaimed, " Five thousand guineas, on my soul! Well, this is a lucky windfall."

" But you cannot, you will not, you dare not self-appropriate it," exclaimed the countess, once more springing to her feet. " Do you not see," she exclaimed, in a hysterical tone, " that it is intended for a special purpose? "

" But supposing that I, as your husband, consider that your funds would be misapplied," exclaimed the earl, " unless they went to pay my debts, have I not a right to exercise my judgment in the matter? "

" Let there be open war between us, if you will," exclaimed Editha, well-nigh driven to madness, " but give me that money, for it is not mine, it is merely entrusted to me — "

" This is absurd! " exclaimed the earl. " The money is sent to you, this note proves it, and once more I say that what is yours is mine."

The countess again sank back upon the sofa with reeling brain and bursting heart, while her husband, hastily securing the bank-notes about his person, was hurrying from the room, when he accidentally dropped Emmerson's unsigned letter. His hand was upon the door ere he perceived it, and at the same instant, swift as the eagle swoops upon its prey, did Gertrude bound forward and seize upon that letter. Then thrusting it into her bosom, she seemed to concentrate all the lustre of her fine dark eyes in order to fling one burning, scorching glance of hatred and of indignation upon the earl.

For a moment he seemed inclined to tear the document from her, but, suddenly changing his mind, he said, " After all, you are welcome to the letter, since I retain the bank-notes. Without a signature, and ambiguous in its wording as it is, it is valueless as a piece of evidence." Then turning a look of sardonic triumph upon his wife, he said, " Your ladyship exposed me last night, but I think you will agree that you are paying rather dear for it to-day. Were I not satisfied with the vengeance which accident has thus enabled me to wreak, I should at once take and turn this insolent lady's-maid of yours out of the house. As it is, with five

thousand guineas in my pocket, I can afford to be generous."

Thus speaking, the Earl of Curzon strode out of the room, and when the door closed behind him, Editha and Gertrude remained gazing in speechless consternation upon each other.

CHAPTER XXXIV

ANOTHER SUM OF FIVE THOUSAND GUINEAS

"WHAT a dreadful calamity!" said Editha, at length, a visible shudder passing through her form as if she had to deplore the sudden death of some very near relation.

"Dreadful indeed!" echoed the maid. "It seems scarcely credible, it appears like a horrible dream!" Then, after a brief pause, she observed, "But fortunately I possessed myself of Mr. Emmerson's note," and drawing it forth from her bosom she at once threw it into the fire.

"What is to be done?" asked Editha, utterly bewildered.

"Shall I go off at once to Mr. Emmerson and explain everything?" said Gertrude.

"Yes, that is the only alternative," answered the countess. "But will he believe the tale, or will he regard it as a base subterfuge to cover an infamous cheat on my part? Will he not fancy, in a word, that I am seeking to self-appropriate the money?"

"I must work upon his feelings to produce the contrary impression," said Gertrude. "I must speak to him of your love, your devotion toward him, and your despair at what has taken place."

"Be quick, then, Gertrude, depart at once," said the countess. "Mr. Emmerson leaves the City between four and five, and there is yet time."

The unhappy Editha hastened up-stairs to her boudoir, there to ruminate in solitude upon the calamity which had just occurred, and to rack her brain with a thousand useless conjectures as to the cause which could possibly have led her husband to seize upon that parcel. In the meantime Gertrude sallied forth to pay Mr. Emmerson another visit in Nicholas Lane.

Two hours elapsed, during which interval the Countess of Curzon gave way to an infinite variety of disagreeable and bewildering reflections. To what end could this warfare with her husband possibly lead? At one moment she triumphed, at another she was forced to endure the most perilous defeats, and in the long run would she not be crushed altogether? The gloom deepened around her soul as these thoughts were forced upon her, and in acute suspense did she await Gertrude's return. It was half-past five when the abigail came back, and the moment she entered the boudoir, the expression of her countenance at once convinced Editha that she had failed in her mission.

"Have you seen him?" she said, in a quick voice which showed that suspense was agony.

"No, dear lady," answered Gertrude, "I have not seen Mr. Emmerson. Everything is turning against us. Pressing business, transpiring all of a sudden, has compelled him to depart post-haste on a long journey. I saw his head clerk, Mr. Varian, that young man, you know, whom he has so generously taken back into his service —"

"Well, well, go on, for Heaven's sake!" said Editha.

"Mr. Varian told me that Mr. Emmerson had received a letter between three and four o'clock — it was a letter from the Continent, I think he said — which compelled him to start off at once. The whole affair was so sudden that Mr. Emmerson had scarcely time to write even a note to his wife. Had I been half an hour earlier I should have just arrived in time to see him ere he stepped into the post-chaise."

"But when will he return?" asked Editha, still in an agony of suspense.

"Alas! dear lady," replied Gertrude, "it is altogether uncertain. He told Mr. Varian that he should be absent at least ten days."

"Good heavens!" said Editha, clasping her hands, "and in the meantime I may be ruined. Oh, the fatal folly of that tortuous and roundabout plan of his to silence the villain Malpas!"

"It is useless repining," said Gertrude. "Let us, with our usual courage, look the matter boldly in the face."

"Well, I will do so," said the countess, assuming a forced composure. "It is quite clear, Gertrude, that something

must immediately be done. Malpas is capable of any atrocity, and now that he has once begun to threaten, he will not leave me alone. Emmerson's letter, which he wrote this morning in your presence, and of which you approved, has reached Malpas by this time, and he will of course expect to hear shortly from me. Where can I procure five thousand guineas? My sisters, all my relatives, are away from town at this moment — "

"I have it, dear lady!" suddenly exclaimed Gertrude. "Lord Sackville — "

"Oh, I could not possibly ask him such a thing," cried the countess. "Remember, he has not as yet received the crowning favour from me, and it would appear as if I were actually bargaining for the sale of myself."

"No such thing!" rejoined Gertrude, impetuously. "Every lady of rank either gives money to her paramour, or else receives money from him. Besides, in this frightful emergency, which is better, to lay yourself under an obligation to Lord Sackville, or to stand the chance of annoyance, vexation, and exposure at the hands of Colonel Malpas? Moreover," continued Gertrude, "now that Emmerson has written to tell the colonel he has communicated the latter's threats to you — "

"Yes, I understand," said Editha. "The colonel will be expecting some kind of communication from me. When first he was in prison he wrote to me, and I sent back his letters unread. Now he may avenge himself upon me."

"And remember," added Gertrude, "that inasmuch as the earl appears resolved to open every letter and parcel coming to the house, it may happen that Colonel Malpas will write to your ladyship and that his letter may fall into his lordship's hands. If so, there would doubtless be grounds at once for separation and divorce, for, depend upon it, the colonel will not be delicate in his allusions to past affairs when once he does take up his pen to address your ladyship in the same threatening way he has already adopted in writing to Mr. Emmerson."

"Yes, I see all the perils of my position," observed Editha, "and this Malpas must be silenced at any cost."

"And at any sacrifice, my lady," added Gertrude, emphatically. "There is consequently no alternative but to apply to Lord Sackville."

"I shall never dare look him in the face to ask him such a thing," said Editha, wringing her hands.

"Then entrust the matter to me," exclaimed Gertrude. "Write his lordship a note, stating that you have the most urgent, the most imperative, and, indeed, the most cruel need for five thousand guineas, and I will take it myself to Carlton House."

"But suppose that Sackville has not such a sum at his command?" observed Editha.

"Then he can procure it," rejoined Gertrude, who never would allow herself to recognize difficulties in her path if she could possibly see beyond them.

The Countess of Curzon sat down to her desk and penned a hasty note to Lord Sackville in the sense which Gertrude had suggested, and when it was duly folded and sealed, the indefatigable abigail sallied forth again and betook herself to Carlton House. But here we must leave her for a few minutes, in order to see what was passing within the walls of that palatial residence.

It was now verging toward seven o'clock. Venetia was dining *tête-à-tête* with the prince, and her husband, Lord Sackville, was entertaining Captain Tash also at a *tête-à-tête* dinner in his own room. The reader will remember how it was that the gallant captain had been led, in the afternoon, to pay his respects to Lord Sackville, and although Horace had no very high opinion of that gentleman, he nevertheless could not help entertaining a grateful remembrance of the manner in which he had come forward to vindicate Venetia against the representations of Colonel Malpas. Lord Sackville had therefore received Captain Tash with an appearance of cordiality, and luncheon being ordered, the gallant officer became so enamoured of the Madeira and port that he did not offer to move till he had emptied a couple of decanters. Just then Horace received a message from Venetia to the effect that the prince wished her to dine alone with him, and not having anything particular to do, he invited Tash to stay and pass the remainder of the day with him. Such a proposal was by no means to be refused, and as Robin had been consigned to the hospitable care of Lord Sackville's valet, the gallant officer found himself altogether placed in circumstances the most congenial to his sense of enjoyment. The reader may be well assured that he did as ample justice to

the dinner served up in the evening as he had shown toward the lunch in the afternoon, and Horace happened to be in one of those humours when the rattling, offhand, miscellaneous conversation of such a man as Tash was welcomed as the means of dispelling ennui.

The captain, keeping in view the mission which he had received from the Marquis of Leveson, failed not to speak of all the pleasures, delights, and enjoyments of London life in the most rapturous terms, and he described various places of recreation and amusement with which Horace was previously unacquainted except by name. Tash likewise made his noble host understand that it was absolutely necessary for him to have an excellent stud of horses, in order to sustain the dignity of his position, and Horace, well knowing that his gallant friend was a good judge of horseflesh, at once gave an order to procure a few thoroughbreds. After continuing in this strain for some time, the captain — who, by the bye, was drinking his wine out of tumblers, he having a mortal contempt for such "thimblefuls" as wine-glasses — launched forth into the most magniloquent praises of Lady Sackville, and at length, slapping his noble entertainer familiarly upon the shoulder, he exclaimed, "You possess a treasure of a wife, my lord, a veritable treasure, my lord. And mark, I, Rolando Tash, tell you so. If anybody dares deny it, I will flay him alive. My man Robin admires her, and he is no bad judge, let me tell you, and all the world admires her, which is of course very flattering for your lordship. But when I say that her ladyship is a treasure, I mean what I say. In fact — and here, my lord, I can't do better than drink my nineteenth tumbler of port to her ladyship's health — in fact," continued Tash, having drained the capacious glass, "her ladyship is a treasure of beauty and a treasure of wealth. Depend upon it, that whatever money your lordship might require for your own purposes, her ladyship can obtain it."

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded Horace, not knowing whether the captain meant to allude to Venetia's somewhat equivocal position or not.

"Never do you mind, my lord, what I mean," answered the captain, as he despatched his twentieth tumbler. "I mean what I say, and you may be assured that I know what I mean. Only just try the next time you want money,

and ask her ladyship to be your banker. The fact is, she possesses a secret mine of wealth unknown to your lordship, and which I only discovered by accident. A little bird whispered it in my ears — "

At this moment a footman entered, and made a whispered communication to Lord Sackville to the effect that a young female, who gave the name of Miss Gertrude, wished to see him immediately in the adjacent parlour. Apologizing to Captain Tash on account of leaving him for a few minutes, Lord Sackville hastened to the next apartment, where Gertrude put Editha's note into his hand. Horace immediately perused it, but the reader must not fancy that he was very much surprised at the request contained therein, for, as Gertrude had observed to her mistress, that was an age when every titled lady was either a lender or borrower in respect to her paramour. Besides, whist and faro were all the rage in fashionable life, and many ladies were such desperate gamesters that they lost or won thousands in the course of the year. It therefore instantaneously struck Lord Sackville that the Countess of Curzon had contracted one of those " debts of honour " (Oh, the vile prostitution of the term!) which must be paid at once, and hence the interpretation of the cruel need which her ladyship experienced for the money. On hinting this idea to Gertrude she hastened to confirm it, adding that her mistress was in such a dreadful state of mind for fear of being disgraced by any delay in the payment of the debt that she was well-nigh distracted.

" Distracted indeed! " exclaimed Horace, as he turned away from the abigail, and began walking in an agitated manner to and fro, for he himself felt distracted at being thus applied to for an amount which he had no means of procuring at the moment.

What on earth was he to do? Not for worlds would he refuse thus to befriend Lady Curzon, and yet he could not possibly see how he was to raise the money. Suddenly the extraordinary yet very significant remark of Captain Tash recurred to his mind. Could Venetia assist him? Had his wife really some peculiar resources unknown to him? It was scarcely possible. Being acquainted with all her previous history, he did not see how this could be. And yet Tash had spoken with the air of a man well assured of what

he asserts. At all events there could be no harm in trying. The case was desperate, and Horace caught eagerly at any hope.

Bidding Gertrude wait a few minutes, Horace quitted the room and repaired to that part of the palace in which the prince regent's own private apartments were situated. Waiting in an anteroom, he sent in a footman with a message to his wife to the effect that he wished to speak to her for a few minutes. It happened at the moment that the prince, after a somewhat early dinner with Venetia, had drunk so copiously that he had just fallen asleep upon the sofa, and therefore his lovely mistress was enabled at once to come forth in compliance with her husband's summons.

"Is anything the matter, Horace?" she inquired, immediately perceiving that there was a certain uneasiness and agitation in his manner.

"My dear Venetia," he answered, "I wish to consult you as to what I am to do in a particular embarrassment which has just sprung up. A year or two ago, — long before I was acquainted with you, — I contracted a debt under peculiar circumstances. It was a debt of honour, and up to this moment I have never even been asked for the money. Now it is suddenly demanded of me, and unless paid to-night or to-morrow morning, the person to whom it is due will be utterly and totally ruined. An exposure of his affairs will take place, my name will be implicated — In fact, Venetia, it is serious, very serious."

"But how on earth, Horace, can I assist you?" she exclaimed.

"I do not know," he responded, in an agitated manner. "But women are so ingenious, and you, of all women, possess such a readiness at expedients."

"But is it really so very, very serious?" she demanded, looking him fixedly in the face.

"On my soul," he replied, trembling with uncertainty as to the result, "it is most serious, and unless I can pay this amount my very character will be compromised to a frightful degree. Young in the peerage as we are, and having by our sudden rise excited so many jealousies, envies, and hatreds, our position is a delicate one, and such an exposure would be most disastrous, most ruinous."

"Well, Horace, console yourself," said Venetia. "For-

tunately I have a little hoard from some private gifts of the prince — However," she cried, suddenly, " I have not time now to enter into particulars. Go back to your wine and your guests, whoever you may have with you, and in an hour come up to me in my boudoir. You shall then have the money."

" Ten thousand, thousand thanks, Venetia! " exclaimed Horace. Then as he embraced her, he said, " If we are not the most devoted lovers in the world, or the most faithful and exemplary husband and wife, we are at all events the very best of friends."

" And that is perhaps better," answered Venetia. " But I must now return to the prince, and in an hour you will come to me in my boudoir."

They then separated. Horace went back to Gertrude, to tell her to wait an hour, as he had sent for the money, and then returning to Captain Tash, he proceeded to question this gallant gentleman relative to the secret resources of Venetia. But Tash — little suspecting, however, that accident had so speedily put Lord Sackville in the way of testing the experiment in the matter — could be induced to say nothing more than that " what he said he knew was to be relied on."

In the meantime Venetia, instead of returning to the prince regent, whom she had left snoring and half-drunk on the sofa, hastened up to her boudoir, and summoning Jessica, she hurriedly communicated her intention to that faithful dependent. Enveloping themselves each in a thick cloak, and putting on plain straw hats with ample veils, they prepared to sally forth. But previously Venetia opened her jewel-coffer, and took off five of the pearls from the string which the Marquis of Leveson had given her. These she enveloped in a piece of paper and carefully secured in her bosom. Then, accompanied by Jessica, she issued from the palace by means of one of the private doors.

Taking a hackney-coach in Pall Mall, they proceeded direct to Albemarle Street, and on inquiring at Leveson House if the marquis were at home, they were at once admitted into the mansion. Being shown to a parlour on the ground floor, they were almost immediately joined by the marquis, and Venetia, at once raising her veil, said to the nobleman, " When I spoke so triumphantly and so positively this

morning in respect to the impossibility of ever needing to use you as my banker, I did not foresee what was to happen to-night."

"If your ladyship is about to present your cheques," said the marquis, with ill-subdued delight and surprise, "you need make no apology. The drafts shall at once be honoured."

"I tender your lordship my best thanks," said Venetia, assuming an air of cold dignity, in order to prevent her from seeming completely humiliated. "This young person," she added, observing that the marquis was looking at Jessica, who still retained the dark veil over her countenance, "is my confidential maid."

The nobleman bowed in courteous acknowledgment of this explanation. Then drawing forth his pocketbook and taking out a quantity of notes, he said, "To what amount does my fair patroness propose to draw upon her most honoured and grateful banker?"

"To this amount," answered Venetia, producing the five pearls.

"'Tis but a trifle," observed the marquis, and he then handed Venetia bank-notes to the amount of five thousand guineas.

"Again I thank your lordship," she said, and drawing down her veil, took her departure, the nobleman accompanying her as far as the front door and handing her into the hackney-coach.

Venetia was not altogether ten minutes inside Leveson House upon the present occasion, and as she returned homeward in company with Jessica, she observed, "I most sincerely hope that this will be the last time I shall ever have occasion to set foot in that dwelling. An apprehension of covert treachery and dark, mysterious danger sat heavy upon my heart the whole time."

Alighting from the hackney-coach in Pall Mall, Venetia and her confidential maid rëentered Carlton House, and when Horace, at the expiration of the hour, went up into his wife's boudoir, he found her seated quite alone, awaiting his presence, so that he little thought she had been compelled to sally forth during the interval in order to obtain the money which she now placed in his hand. Having duly reiterated his grateful thanks, he once more left her in order to hasten

and consign the amount to Gertrude's keeping, and the abigail, infinitely delighted at the success of her mission, sped back with a light step and a still lighter heart to Grosvenor Street.

The reader may imagine far better than we can possibly describe the joy of Lady Curzon at thus so easily obtaining a second sum of five thousand guineas, and early on the following morning the amount, together with the letter which the countess had penned in readiness, and with the contents of which the reader is already acquainted, was conveyed by the trustworthy Gertrude to the King's Bench. Delivering the parcel into the hands of a turnkey, she took her departure thence, and never was drop of water more welcome to the Arab wanderer in the desert than was this pecuniary succour to Colonel Malpas. He instantaneously sent for Mr. Emmerson's solicitor and coolly proposed to pay him three thousand guineas for his release, but the attorney, having already received an intimation from the money-broker relative to the colonel's affair, and knowing therefore how he was to act, flatly refused to receive a single farthing less than the whole amount. Malpas, who was so heartily sick of imprisonment that he would have made any sacrifice to procure his liberty, accordingly handed over the entire sum to the solicitor, and was thus enabled to take his departure from the King's Bench.

But on issuing thence he found himself alone, as it were, upon the wide world. He knew not what to do, or whither to go. It was true that he had a few guineas in his pocket, but when they were gone, how was he to obtain further supplies? His wife's relatives had totally discarded him, and she herself had declared that she would never see him more. The circumstance of the terrible thrashing which he had received from Captain Tash had got noised abroad at the time, together with a rumour that this punishment had been inflicted on him for having endeavoured to cheat the prince regent, the Marquis of Leveson, and others, out of a sum of six thousand guineas, so that every chance of finding his way back into society seemed distant enough. In plain terms, Colonel Malpas was in the unpleasant predicament of a man who found himself not only penniless, but also "cut" by all the world, and therefore, on emerging from incarceration, it was natural enough that he should ask himself over and over again what he was to do.

He wandered into a tavern near the foot of Westminster Bridge, and ordering some refreshments, sat down to reflect upon his position, and he already began to think that it were much better to have kept the five thousand guineas and remained in prison, than to have come forth penniless. For a moment it struck him that he would write to Lady Curzon and demand a few hundred pounds on the pretext that it was rendering him no service to release him from prison and leave him destitute. But to attempt any further extortion within a few hours after the display of such bounteous munificence on her part was an infamy even too great for Colonel Malpas to contemplate seriously, unscrupulous and heartless though he were. But still recurred the question, what was he to do?

In the midst of his bewilderment his eye casually fell upon a paragraph in a newspaper that lay before him, and in which some court scribe had indulged in a flaming eulogium upon Lady Sackville, extolling her for so many charities, amenities, and estimable qualities, that if she had only possessed a tithe of them in reality she would have been a perfect angel. As the colonel read this panegyric, his thoughts were suddenly turned into a new channel. Venetia was assuredly generous-hearted, and, moreover, she had risen to so high an eminence that she could afford to be magnanimous and forgiving. What if he were to write and implore her intervention in procuring for him the pardon of the prince regent for his past misconduct? If his Royal Highness could only be induced to take him by the hand, all his former friends would flock around him again, he might get back into society, and still find means of pushing his way in the world.

The hope was a desperate one, but the man's position itself was desperate, and he could lose nothing by the trial. He accordingly proceeded to pen a most humble, contrite, and even grovelling letter to Lady Sackville, confessing himself a reptile deserving only to be trodden beneath her heel, but appealing to her generosity for pardon and to her magnanimity for succour. He declared himself her slave, ready to lick the dust at her feet, and willing to go to the ends of the earth, if he could serve her. In fine, he wrote just such a letter as might be expected from a sneaking, paltry coward, reduced to his last shifts, and compelled to have

recourse to the meanest and most humiliating of expedients.

Having despatched the letter by a messenger to Carlton House, he remained at the tavern anxiously waiting for the reply. The emissary was absent for upwards of an hour, at the expiration of which time he returned with a verbal message to the effect that Lady Sackville would grant Colonel Malpas an interview between three and four o'clock in the afternoon.

The colonel was positively astounded at this result of a proceeding adopted in utter desperation. He could scarcely believe that the messenger had delivered the verbal response aright. But the man declared that the message had been given him by a very smart and pretty-looking young damsel having the appearance of a lady's-maid, and the colonel was therefore reassured against the probability of error.

To be brief, he repaired to Carlton House punctually at half-past three o'clock, and a footman immediately introduced him into a drawing-room where the brilliant Venetia was awaiting his arrival. Nothing could exceed the cold grandeur and icy magnificence of demeanour with which she received him, and she made him feel that she really regarded him as a wretched worm whom she forbore from trampling underfoot merely because there was a way in which she could make him serviceable. The interview lasted for nearly an hour, during which Venetia explained her views to Colonel Malpas, offering him a certain private mission to which she proposed to attach a liberal remuneration, with a promise that if it were carried out successfully she would consider what more could be done in the colonel's behalf. As a matter of course he cheerfully accepted the mission thus offered him, and in terms of grovelling adulation did he express his gratitude. Venetia listened to him with superb disdain, for even while she was thus giving him the means of subsistence she made him feel that it was very far from being for his own sake, but simply because there were circumstances at the moment which thus accidentally enabled her to make use of him as a tool or instrument in the furtherance of her own mysterious purposes.

Having received a sum of money for his travelling-expenses and immediate wants, Colonel Malpas took his

leave of Lady Sackville, and within an hour he was on his way in a post-chaise for Dover.

In the evening of that same day the Earl of Curzon repaired to Carlton House in obedience to a summons which he had received from Venetia, and for upwards of an hour was he alone with her in earnest and serious deliberation. At the conclusion of the interview his lordship also took a post-chaise and set out on a journey to Dover.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE VILLA AT GENEVA

The reader must suppose three months to have elapsed since the occurrences which we have just been relating, and the scene now changes to a beautiful villa-residence in one of the delightful suburbs of Geneva.

The house itself was spacious. The rooms on the ground floor opened with windows reaching the ground, upon sloping lawns, and the casements of the upper story were furnished with balconies filled with the choicest flowers. For though it was but the middle of the month of March and in England the winds blew bleak and cold, yet the season was all warmth and brightness and floral fragrance in the sunny South. The trees were covered with verdure, the gardens were gorgeous with flowers, and nothing could be more beautiful, nothing more picturesque, than the villa-residence to which we have alluded, seated as it was upon a gentle eminence commanding a view of the lake, and surrounded by gardens and pleasure-grounds laid out in the most tasteful manner.

It was at this villa that her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales — better known to the masses in this country as the Princess Caroline — was passing a short time with her retinue. The injured wife of the prince regent, after visiting several towns in Italy and some of the most interesting scenery of Switzerland, had suddenly taken it into her head to settle down in this secluded but charming retreat in the Genevese territory.

Her Royal Highness's suite was small, consisting altogether of only a dozen persons. There were six ladies in waiting, of whom Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen were the three junior. The other three had been for some time in the

household of the princess and were devoted to her interests, but, as the reader is well aware, the Misses Owen were the trained spies and secret emissaries of the conspirators who were leagued to accomplish the ruin of her Royal Highness. The principal equerry in attendance upon the princess was the Baron Bergami, with whom she had been acquainted in her youth at her father's court in Brunswick, and for whom at that period it was supposed she had entertained some little affection. After an interval of nineteen years, circumstances had again thrown the baron in her way, during her recent visit to Italy, and hearing that he was poor even to actual distress, and had been very unfortunate, she at once took compassion upon him and offered him that situation which we now find him occupying in her household. In addition to those members of her suite already mentioned, we must observe that there were three pages, a young lady acting as " reader " and secretary, and two or three other females, amongst whom was Mrs. Ranger. Such was her Royal Highness's retinue which accompanied her on her travels, but now of course there were the menial servants, in addition thereto, at the villa, the entire household therefore consisting of upwards of twenty persons. The mansion was, however, large, having several detached buildings and outhouses at the back, and it was thus enabled to accommodate so large an establishment.

It was on a lovely evening, in the middle of the month of March, 1815, that Emma Owen, the second of the sisters, issued forth from a side door of the villa, and threading a shrubbery of evergreens, entered one of the beautiful gardens where exquisite specimens of statuary appeared amongst the natural glories of the scene. A dark scarf, negligently thrown over her shoulders, set off the whiteness of her skin to great perfection, and made her charms, which the low-bodied dress left much exposed, seem absolutely dazzling. Very beautiful, indeed, did she appear, for on her cheeks was the heightened bloom of expectation as she emerged from the shrubbery and flung a rapid glance around the garden. Then, as she beheld a gentleman suddenly spring over the boundary wall at the extremity, she affected to be terrified, and turning suddenly back, she made a movement as if about to retrace her way toward the villa. Along the gravel walks did he bound, threading the Elysian maze formed by

the parterres of flowers, and as Emma did not fly very speedily, he was in less than a minute by her side.

" My angel, my charmer! " he exclaimed, seizing her hand and pressing it to his lips, " wherefore did you endeavour to avoid me? "

" Oh, because this is madness, perfect madness, to scale the wall," she answered, with an appearance of mingled alarm and anger. " Besides, for what do you take me, or what can you think of me, that you adopt such means to seek my presence? "

" I take you for what you are," was the gentleman's response, as he still retained her hand in his own, " one of the loveliest of your sex. And I have ventured to watch until you came for your wonted evening walk in the garden, so that I might seek this opportunity of throwing myself at your feet and declaring how much I love you. Oh, wherefore be thus cruel? " he exclaimed, as Emma endeavoured — or at least affected to endeavour — to extricate herself from the half embrace in which he now held her.

" Unhand me, sir," she said, " and if you wish that proper explanations should pass between us, I am willing to grant you an opportunity for a few minutes."

" Thanks, ten thousand thanks, dearest lady! " exclaimed the gentleman. " That is all I require." Then conducting her to a seat in a bower of roses, he said, as he still retained her hand in his own, " To see you is to admire you, to know you is to love you, but, ah! to be possessed of your love in return were a happiness beyond description! When first I beheld you, — you remember it well, it was two months ago in the cathedral at Milan, — I was instantaneously smitten with the power of your charms. Seizing the opportunity to explain the subject of some painting which you were regarding at the time, I introduced myself to your notice."

" Think you, sir, that I do not recollect the incident full well? " asked Emma. " I am no prude, there is no ridiculous affectation about me, and I not only remember how we first met at Milan, but likewise how you have since followed me from place to place, until I arrived here with her Royal Highness three weeks ago."

" But you cannot say, Miss Owen," exclaimed the gentleman, " that there has been anything rude, uncourteous, or

obtrusive in my conduct? Never have I ventured to accost you save when I observed that you were alone; never have I attempted to force myself upon your attention when you have been in attendance on her Royal Highness, or in company of the other ladies of her household."

"I am free to confess," said Emma, with one of those arch smiles which she knew so well how to assume, and which rendered her so truly bewitching, so dangerously captivating, "I am free to confess that every word you are now uttering is truth itself. So far from accosting me when I have been with others, you have invariably watched your opportunity to catch me when alone. If at Milan or at Turin I merely went out unattended, the length of a couple of streets, to purchase an article at a shop, you were immediately at my side — "

"Yes, dear young lady," interrupted her companion, "to offer you my arm, to protect you against insult, defend you against danger — "

"Yes, and also to whisper certain love-nonsense in mine ears," continued Emma, with a gay laugh and a mischievous look. "And it has been the same since we arrived at Geneva. Whenever I have happened to be alone, behold the opportunity for your appearance! The day before yesterday, for instance, it was on yonder heights, last evening it was during a stroll along the shore of the lake, and now, when anxious to escape from the heated dinner-saloon and enjoy the fresh air of the garden — "

"Your tormentor again rushes into your presence," said her companion, with a smile irradiating his really very handsome countenance and showing his fine teeth.

"Yes, but in order to rush into my presence he scales a wall," exclaimed Emma, with an arch look which showed how very far she was from being angry.

"My angel, my adored one, for such indeed you are," exclaimed the gentleman, "can you look me in the face and declare that my presence here in this garden was altogether unexpected on the present occasion? When we parted yesterday on the shore of the lake, I ventured to express a wish and a hope that you would grant me another interview as speedily as possible, and then, with your own pretty mouth and in the melodious cadences of your sweet voice, did you hint the probability that you would be walking in the

garden this evening. Thereupon I avowed my intention of laying in wait thus to catch you, and I do not recollect at the time that you gave utterance to anything in the shape of a negative."

"Because I could scarcely believe it possible that you would have the presumption thus to introduce yourself within the precincts of her Royal Highness's dwelling," and as Emma thus spoke she again looked with a certain mischievous archness in her companion's face.

"You provoking creature," he exclaimed, flinging his arms about her neck and straining her to his breast. Nor did she withdraw her lips from the close pressure of his own. "There, now I have punished you in a befitting way for the manner in which you have been talking to me. But, after all, you do not seem to fancy that I am absolutely hideous?"

"Oh, what conceit on your part," exclaimed Emma. Then as one of her beautiful white hands played most involuntarily, as it were, with the light, curling hair of her companion, who, by the bye, was tall, slender, well made, and good-looking, she said, "I certainly do not consider you particularly ugly, and it is perhaps because your personal appearance is so much in your favour that I, like a silly, weak-minded girl as I am, have allowed myself to be inveigled into a kind of romantic friendship for you."

"Oh, then you admit this much?" exclaimed her companion, with one arm down about her waist and his left hand clasping hers.

"Well, I have made the admission," she said, smiling with a gay archness, "and I do not wish to recall it. But did we not just now say something about explanations, and if so, let them commence at once. In the first place, should you really wish this friendship of ours to continue, you will tell me your name, for you can scarcely fail to remember that notwithstanding the numerous occasions on which you have forced yourself, as it were, upon my presence, you have never once condescended to make me aware who it might be that thus considered me worthy of his persevering attentions."

"True, dearest girl," exclaimed her companion, "it was most remiss on my part. But will you not pardon me when I assure you that every time I find myself in your presence I become so absorbed in the contemplation of your charms and drinking in the melody of your sweet voice, that I totally

forget everything connected with myself. But now you remind me that I have indeed been most remiss, and I would not for the world have you imagine that I purposely studied the slightest concealment toward you."

"Doubtless, then," said Emma, "this long preface will herald the revelation of your name?"

"Have you ever heard of Colonel Malpas?" inquired her companion, with a transitory look of uneasiness as to the impression that his words might make upon the young lady.

"Yes," she exclaimed, "I have assuredly heard of him as one of the gay companions of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. But for the last six months I have been away from England, and therefore unacquainted with all that has been going on in the fashionable world at home. But are you Colonel Malpas?"

"I am," replied this gentleman, well pleased to hear that his fair companion was so much in the dark as to home occurrences.

And here we may observe that the colonel had shaved off his moustache, and, with his countenance slightly browned by the warmth of the sunny South, he had lost that air of a drawing-room officer which was wont to distinguish him. He had, moreover, to a certain extent got rid of the affected drawl in his voice, and thus, possessing a very handsome person and elegant manners, he was but too well calculated to make an impression upon any young female who was either tenderly sensitive or else fervidly licentious. Of this latter description was Emma Owen, and thus was it that the assiduities of Colonel Malpas had from the very first proved so welcome to her that she had already made up her mind that if he should prove bold and daring the resistance she might offer would not be of too desperate a character. Besides, Emma had another reason for encouraging the colonel, — a reason altogether unconnected with her own sensual passions, but having reference to the part which she had to perform in carrying out the views of the conspirators against her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales.

"And you are Colonel Malpas?" she said, gazing with a kind of subdued tenderness upon her companion. Then, as a sudden idea seemed to strike her, she said, with altering voice and overclouding look, "But if I mistake not, I have heard of a Mrs. Malpas, and therefore you are married?"

"Yes, unfortunately I am," answered the colonel, who was playing his own part quite as well as Emma enacted hers, and calling to his aid the most impassioned air he could possibly assume, he said, "Yes, 'tis true, alas! too true, that I am married. But married to whom? To one who never possessed my heart, and who never loved me. It was for her gold that I offered her my hand, it was for my social position she accepted it. A union, begun in selfishness, could not end in love. But I need not dwell upon this unhappy marriage of mine. Suffice it to say, that I am separated from my wife. She has returned to her friends, and I am, as it were, my own master once again. Sated for the time with the pleasures and enjoyments of the fashionable world, I have come to wander upon the Continent for change of scene and variety of recreation. But little did I think that this visit of mine to southern Europe would turn the very springtide of my life into a new channel! Little did I think that I was destined to meet one whose image has become indelibly stamped upon my heart! Oh, dearest Emma, hitherto there has been much lively discourse between us, much jocularity and badinage, and indeed your archness is so amiable, and your most mischievous looks are so often the most seductive as they are ever the most killing, that it were a pity to implore you to be serious. But serious we must nevertheless be, while I declare solemnly and sacredly that I love you."

"But you are married, you are married!" exclaimed Emma, deeming it right to affect a temporary prudery, because a too speedy surrender under the circumstances would, she thought, stamp her character with unpardonable levity in the estimation of her companion. But still, though she seemed to give vent to that ejaculation with a kind of inward anguish, she did not withdraw herself from the half-embrace in which the colonel retained her.

"Because I am married, dearest girl," he whispered, with all the appearance of deep emotion, "it is no reason wherefore I should not love you. You are beautiful, you are fascinating, and I have no power over volition. Would that I could rend asunder the bond which chains me to that destiny of marriage! But I cannot, and while offering you a heart that never loved before, and that will ever be most tenderly devoted and attached, I am unable to say that my hand accompanies it. If you have no love for me in return, you

can, of course, without a pang and without remorse, abandon me to disappointment and despair. But if you do in the slightest degree reciprocate that passion which I experience, you will sacrifice all and everything to such a feeling."

"What mean you? What mean you?" asked Emma, whose strong passions were already influenced by that contact in which she was placed with her handsome companion.

"I mean, dearest," he replied, drawing her still more closely toward him, and venturing upon bolder dalliances than he had as yet dared to attempt, "I mean that if we are to be happy together, you must make up your mind to the omission of that ceremony which society has ordained to be performed in a church, but which, nevertheless, has no power of binding hearts, however indissolubly it may unite hands. I mean," continued Malpas, still more plainly developing the detestable but hackneyed sophistry of every man who tempts a woman to her undoing, "I mean, dearest, that you must dispense with the aid of a clergyman to unite us, and that instead of formally and ceremoniously declaring yourself to be mine in the presence of man, you will consent to become so in the view of Heaven."

"Oh, what power is there in your words!" murmured Emma, growing, as it were, to his breast against which her bosom rose and fell with voluptuous heavings. Yet it was not any magic persuasion in the colonel's language, but the rising excitement of her own devouring passions, that was now melting her into soft and sensuous yielding.

"Dearest, dearest Emma!" said the colonel, pressing his lips to hers and experiencing the thrill of ecstasy which was conveyed by the soft ardour of her caresses. Then, after a long pause, he said, "To-night, dearest Emma, you must admit me into the villa."

"Oh, no, no, I dare not!" she murmured, but in a manner which showed that she meant to yield to a little further persuasion.

"Ah! then you do not love me," he exclaimed, and still he pressed her more closely in his arms, in order to sustain that frenzy of the passions which he saw was influencing her and which made her whole frame tremble and vibrate.

"It is cruel of you thus to accuse me," she said, nestling still closer if possible in his embrace, and as through the

arbour of roses her countenance caught the last beams of the setting sun, its expression was that of a languor so softly sensuous, so bewitchingly wanton, that Malpas was encouraged to seek the crowning bliss then and there.

But as he thus sought to make her entirely his own, a scintillation of prudence flashed up in Emma's mind, even amidst the delicious agitation of those desires which were well-nigh indomitable, and suddenly recollecting that this was the hour when the princess and the ladies of her suite were wont to walk in the gardens, she so far resisted the present daring endeavours of the colonel as to promise that if he would leave her now he should receive admission to her chamber at a later hour when night drew her veil upon the scene. Then, in low, soft whispers, interrupted by frequent kisses, both given and received, did Emma explain to her lover how he was to proceed between eleven and twelve that night in order to gain her room without fear of observation.

They then separated, Colonel Malpas once more scaling the wall of the enclosure, and Emma Owen taking two or three turns up and down a secluded gravel walk, in order to regain her composure ere she joined the princess and her suite in their evening stroll through the gardens.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE SECRET EXPEDITION

In the wall at the back part of the spacious grounds belonging to the villa was a door opening upon a narrow road, which led for about a quarter of a mile through some fields stretching up to the verge of the city of Geneva, and it was about half-past ten o'clock, on the same evening of which we have been writing, that two female figures stole forth from that garden door.

The silver moon rode high in the heavens, attended by countless myriads of stars, like a virgin-queen with her courtly galaxy of maidens, but a chill breeze, coming from the mountains and passing over the immense lake, would have been of itself a sufficient reason to explain wherefore those two females were so well muffled up in ample cloaks. It was, however, no reason wherefore they should be so carefully veiled, and why on issuing forth they should cast such quick and anxious glances around, as if fearful of being observed. Indeed, it was evident enough that they had now quitted the villa for no ordinary purpose of enjoying a ramble in the silence, the moonlight, and the loneliness of that hour, but they had some secret and important business on hand.

"The coast is clear, Agatha," said Mrs. Ranger, for she indeed was one of the females thus cloaked and veiled, and the eldest Miss Owen was the other. "Come, let us be quick. But your eyes are better than mine: do you see anybody approaching?"

"No, not a soul," answered Agatha. "But stop one moment. I must lock the gate, and take the key with me. Heavens! how my hand trembles. I positively feel as if I were about to commit some heinous crime."

" 'Tis cold, 'tis the night air," said Mrs. Ranger. " You must not give way to idle fears or gloomy presentiments."

" But you tell me," said Agatha, whose teeth chattered audibly, " that the house to which we are going is situated in one of the most secluded quarters of Geneva."

" The terror implied by this remark is foolish, Agatha," said Mrs. Ranger. " No one will molest us; there is no danger. The police regulations of Geneva are excellent, and crime is scarcely heard of. Besides, if I am courageous enough to venture thus by night into a lonely quarter for your sake, surely you can conquer this repugnance — "

" Pardon me, my dear friend," said Agatha, " for a good friend indeed have you been to me. Without your aid and advice, I should never have been able thus to have concealed my position."

" Oh, it is simple and easy enough! " answered Mrs. Ranger, as she and Agatha proceeded along the narrow road together, in the direction of Geneva. " I do not mind telling you, my dear girl, that I have had some little experience in these matters in my lifetime, and more than one young lady of high birth, rank, and title has been indebted to me for concealing her shame — I beg your pardon, my dear, I did not mean any imputation — concealing her position, I meant, until almost within a week or two of the crisis. I was once companion to a widow lady of high rank, who had an only daughter, a very beautiful girl, but the strength of whose passions was insuperable. She was engaged to be married to a young nobleman temporarily absent in the colonies, but in the meantime she could not resist the temptation of intriguing with a youthful foot-page in the household. Dear me! " continued Mrs. Ranger, " he was quite a boy, not more than seventeen or eighteen, but nevertheless the result was that the young lady found herself in a way to become a mother. I soon penetrated her secret, and she gratefully gave me her confidence. Fortunate for her was it that she did so, for I enabled her to conceal her position up to within two days of her confinement. Then she quitted home upon some excuse already arranged, and returned in a fortnight, looking a leetle delicate and interesting, it is true, but without an appearance to excite her mother's suspicion as to what had happened. Three months afterward

the young nobleman came home, they were married, and at the present moment they are as happy as the day is long."

"And what became of the child?" asked Agatha, with no mere passing interest in the question, because the subject came very nearly and somewhat painfully home to her own feelings.

"Oh, the child," observed Mrs. Ranger, carelessly. "A gipsy-woman consented to adopt it on condition of receiving fifty pounds."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Miss Owen, with a shudder, which now arose from a tremor at the heart's core, and not from the influence of the night air, "is it possible that the young mother could have shown such heartlessness?"

"Where was the alternative, my dear?" asked Mrs. Ranger, with all the cool unconcern of one who was hardened in iniquity. "It was not likely that I, as the young lady's adviser and confidante, should have allowed a chance of that child sooner or later discovering the secret of its birth, and becoming in the hands of unprincipled persons a means of extortion."

"But in this present case, my dear madam," said Agatha, grasping Mrs. Ranger with convulsive violence by the arm, as they continued their way along the lonely road, "in this present case —"

"What do you mean? — in your case?" asked Mrs. Ranger. "There, I nearly slipped over a stone! Dear me, what a wretched road! But look, Agatha, from this point how beautiful appears the lake at a distance! Does it not seem like an inland sea?"

"My dear Mrs. Ranger," cried the young lady, "do for Heaven's sake talk to me upon the subject that is now uppermost in my thoughts! Pray do not show such callousness. I am entirely in your hands, entirely at your mercy. I have submitted to your advice in all things."

"Well, my love, and have I not given you the best possible counsel? Here you are, near the end of your eighth month, and your appearance is such as to preclude the possibility of suspicion. Besides myself and your sister Emma, not a soul is acquainted with your secret."

"Yes, Julia has discovered it," observed Agatha.

"Well, I suppose it was your own fault," exclaimed Mrs.

Ranger, " and if she discovered it, it was because you must have allowed her to do so."

" Oh, certainly," said Agatha, " and I rather wished her to know it. At first I had concealed my position from her because I did not think her ideas were quite so far advanced as those of Emma. But after the description which she gave us of the artifices and stratagems she practised, under the guise of Laura Linden, upon the self-styled Jocelyn Loftus, I did not think it necessary to have any secrets from her."

" And you were right," observed Mrs. Ranger. " But there is prudence in being cautious and guarded at first. For instance, your mother and yourselves were quite right in not initiating me fully, at the commencement, into the real object of your appointments about the person of the princess. But as circumstances developed themselves and it became necessary for me to know everything, you see how useful I have been."

" Useful indeed!" exclaimed Agatha, " but to me especially have your services been valuable. Ah! a few months ago, when it first struck me that my amour with the prince regent would not be without certain consequences, I treated the matter lightly enough, and I remember laughing over it with Emma in Paris. But as time wore on, the affair seemed to acquire a certain degree of seriousness."

" Such things are always serious with young girls who are in their first scrape," said Mrs. Ranger. " I dare say it will go the round with your two sisters. Here is Emma with some unknown lover dangling at her heels, and Julia with the Earl of Curzon making fierce and violent love to her, also on the sly — But, by the bye, has Emma yet learned the name of her inamorato? "

" No, I think not yet," answered Agatha, impatiently. " She told me something about it this evening, but I had not time to listen to her then, and we therefore postponed the conversation. But pray, my dear Mrs. Ranger, do let me bring your mind back to the question which I asked you ere now."

" Ah! I recollect," exclaimed the woman, who was not only a Hecate of iniquity, but was as heartless as she was vile. " You were talking to me about the expected babe, your babe, and you really seemed as if you already experienced some of that maudlin, mawkish, sickly feeling which

reads all very pretty in romances and novels, and which is called the prompting of maternal instincts, but let me tell you there is very little of it in the fashionable world."

"Nevertheless," observed Agatha, with a sort of gasping of the breath, "I must candidly admit that I do feel much more than I ever thought I should; and though of course anxious, yes, deeply, profoundly anxious, to get through this painful ordeal as tranquilly as possible, and without suspicion, much less exposure, I cannot altogether divest myself of a yearning to acquire the assurance that the innocent offspring of this amour will not be altogether abandoned, deserted, uncared for — "

"Don't be alarmed, Agatha, and don't be childish," interrupted Mrs. Ranger. "Am I not about to introduce you to the worthy doctor whom I have selected to conduct this business throughout? And will you not now have an opportunity of learning from his lips what kind of an arrangement I have made? You ought rather to lavish thanks upon me than convey anything like a remonstrance or reproach, even by implication. Think you, my dear, that I found out Doctor Maravelli without trouble, and without a considerable exercise of that ingenuity wherein I may be said to excel? As a matter of course, dwelling as I am under the roof of her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales, I could not go about openly and publicly asking after a discreet doctor who would engage to do certain services on specific conditions. Had I been thus imprudent, all Geneva would have rung with the scandal by this time, and the common report would be that one of her Royal Highness's ladies was in a way that rendered the services of an accoucheur shortly needful. No, no, my dear girl," continued the vain, conceited, and garrulous Mrs. Ranger, "I do not commit myself in so silly a manner. I knew the value of caution and prudence in this affair as well as in any other that I ever undertook. Accordingly, it was only by dint of cunning inquiries, stealthily pursued, catching a hint in one quarter and following it up in another, then pursuing the subject elsewhere, and so on, it was only, I say, by these means that I at length obtained the information I sought, namely, the abode of a doctor who is sufficiently clever to be trusted in respect to his skill and sufficiently discreet to be trusted in respect to his honour. Moreover, it was necessary that he should be sufficiently

ductile and tractable to induce him to submit to any conditions without asking a single question, and sufficiently needy or else avaricious to induce him to enter heart and soul into the entire business for the sake of the handsome reward held out. Such was the man I had to find, — I, a comparative stranger at Geneva! Nevertheless, aided by my perfect knowledge of the tongue, guided by my discretion, and encouraged by my innate spirit of perseverance, I succeeded; and in Doctor Maravelli are comprised all the qualifications which I have enumerated. Indeed he is a most valuable personage — But here we are at the entrance of the lane leading to his house."

"Lane indeed!" murmured Agatha, recoiling for a moment in alarm from the deep shade of the dismal, narrow, cutthroat-looking street, or rather alley, the mouth of which they had just reached.

For while Mrs. Ranger was delivering herself of the long harangue which we have just recorded, she and her young companion had threaded the fields in safety and now reached the city; but so narrow was the alley into which Mrs. Ranger was about to lead the way that no ray of the pure cold moonlight could penetrate down into the darkness of its shades.

"Good heavens, Agatha!" said Mrs. Ranger, perceiving that her companion stopped short; "what are you afraid of?"

"Afraid," responded Miss Owen, her teeth again chattering audibly, "'tis enough to make any one afraid to think of penetrating into this dreadful neighbourhood where there is not a lamp to light the street, no, nor even a candle flickering from a window. And talking of being afraid, how is it that you, whom I have seen at times so nervous — especially about robbers when we have been travelling — "

"Nervousness, my dear, is a fashionable luxury to which I give way either as a pastime for myself," responded Mrs. Ranger, "or else as a means of making other people uncomfortable when I see them too happy. But I can put off my nervousness just as easily as I can a gala dress when the particular occasion for wearing it is over. Indeed, I can always pump up my courage to a degree commensurate with circumstances. And now, Agatha, are you going to be outdone by me in respect to presence of mind?"

"But this street, or, rather, this lane," said Agatha, still hanging back, "is so dark, it seems as if we were about to plunge into some unknown cavern."

"Oh, nonsense, you have been reading some dreadful romance. I have been here before more than once to see Doctor Maravelli, and already know every inch of the way."

Miss Owen could make no further remonstrance, and accordingly suffered herself to be led onward into the pitch-dark lane by Mrs. Ranger. But still she walked as if every moment expecting either to fall into some yawning gulf, or to be seized upon by some hand thrust forth from the houses which they were skirting; for the truth is that Agatha, though really lacking not the average amount of feminine courage, was in the usual nervous and sickly state arising from her condition, and the influence of which was immensely aggravated by the almost killing means she adopted to conceal her position. We have already stated, in an early chapter of this work, that Mrs. Ranger was a perfect mass of counterfeits and frauds in person as well as in mind, a shadow of mere skin and bone, plumped up into goodly proportions by all kinds of succedaneous means and artificial contrivances; and thus a hag who knew so well how to change the outward configuration of her own form could not possibly have been at a loss to devise means of enabling Agatha to model her shape to temporary circumstances. But as a matter of course the unfortunate girl had to submit to a degree of compression that was in itself a positive crucifixion; and this incessant torture from morning till night had not failed to produce very powerful effects upon her nervous system. Hence the terror with which she was really inspired, and not a tittle of which was assumed, as she threaded the long lane where Mrs. Ranger was now guiding her.

At length they beheld a light feebly glimmering in the distance, and resembling a lamp at the extremity of a long vault.

"That is our destination," said Mrs. Ranger, in an encouraging voice.

But Agatha scarcely felt cheered by the announcement, for the light looked feeble and dim as if burning in the chamber of the dead; and attenuated as the poor young lady's mind was, it cannot be wondered if she experienced all kinds of dread presentiments and supernatural influences

stealing over her. It even seemed as if Mrs. Ranger herself were some evil genius leading her to destruction; and the very sounds of their footfalls, gentle though the tread of ladies always is, sounded through the stupendous silence of the night dread and terrible to her ears.

At length, just as Agatha's terrors were so increasing upon her that she felt as if she must cry out, they reached a gateway over which the light was burning in the form of a dull oil lamp that only just rendered the outlines of a sombre-looking house discernible amidst the darkness. The building was not large, but certainly had a most gaollike appearance, and when the door was opened by an old woman and Agatha was led by Mrs. Ranger into a vestibule, or hall, of dark-coloured wood elaborately carved, it seemed to the young lady as if she were entering the precincts of a church. A chill more icy than any she had this night experienced struck to the very marrow of her bones, and when a low and deeply set door opened from the side of the hall, showing a light within as feebly glimmering as the lamp outside, Agatha really fancied that it was the interior of a vault thus suddenly revealed to her. But at the same instant that doorway was darkened by the appearance of a thin, pale, keen-eyed individual, of middle age, and whose black costume denoted the physician. The first glance thrown upon him at once created the impression that he was a clever man, but an unprincipled one, — a man who would as soon take a life as save it, and as readily administer a cup of poison as the balm of anodyne, provided the murderous employer's bribe was greater than the victim-patient's fee.

" Walk in, ladies," he said, assuming as courteous a tone as possible, and accompanying it with two or three low bows. " I was expecting you according to appointment. You may retire, Mavolta."

This intimation was addressed to the old woman who had opened the gate, and who now withdrew accordingly, while Agatha, accompanied by Mrs. Ranger, entered the place where the lamp was burning, and which was a little parlour fitted up in a manner so sombre as to wear quite a funeral appearance. The doctor, however, hastily made a motion as if about to light another lamp, but Mrs. Ranger at once said, in a significant tone, " Spare yourself that trouble, sir; did I not charge you when I last saw you, that if I brought

with me a certain lady to-night, you would have only the faintest light burning in the room where you received us? "

" And have I not fulfilled your commands, my unknown but most liberal patroness? " exclaimed the doctor; " and if for a moment I mechanically prepared to light another lamp, it was because your companion seemed to hang back as if afraid of penetrating into the gloomy obscurity of this place."

" Thanks for your kind intention, but it is unnecessary," returned Mrs. Ranger.

It now struck Agatha wherefore so feeble a lamp was flickering in the room; it was evidently a precaution insisted upon by Mrs. Ranger, in her previous interviews with the doctor, in order to prevent him from having the slightest chance of penetrating with his eagle eyes through the veils which his visitants wore.

" This, I presume," said Maravelli, pointing toward Agatha, " is the lady concerning whom you, madam," and he turned toward Mrs. Ranger, " have spoken to me? "

" It is so," responded the vile woman thus addressed. " As I have already told you, doctor, my companion is most anxious to assure herself beforehand that every arrangement has been well settled and agreed upon between you and me for the coming event in which she, poor thing! is destined to be the principal actress."

" I am most happy thus to form the acquaintance of one who is to be my patient," said the doctor, " that is, so far as an acquaintance can be possibly made where the countenance is to remain unseen and the name unknown."

" Those are the conditions," observed Mrs. Ranger, " and I will repeat the rest in my companion's presence to satisfy her mind not only that I have made the various arrangements which I have already explained to her, but that you, doctor, understand those arrangements exactly as I have proposed them."

" Proceed," said Agatha, in a low tone; but her fears were now dissipating, and she began to perceive that she had been the prey of unfounded alarms.

" In the first place," resumed Mrs. Ranger, " I have proposed that you, Doctor Maravelli, shall — when the term for this lady's accouchement approaches — hold yourself in

readiness to be fetched at a moment's warning to attend upon her, that you will consent to be conducted blindfold to the place of destination, that you will remain blindfold within its walls — "

" Unless," said Maravelli, " the life of the patient should be in a predicament calculated to set aside all considerations of precaution, in which case I must act according to circumstances."

" Precisely so," observed Mrs. Ranger. " But suppose that all goes on well, — as we may hope and trust, — you will then remain blindfold at the house during the short time your services may be required, and you will come away blindfold afterward. Moreover, you pledge yourself most solemnly and most sacredly — as a man and as a gentleman — that whatever may transpire, you will avail yourself of no circumstance to obtain a glimpse of this lady's countenance? "

" Agreed! " exclaimed Maravelli, " and since you have already given me a right noble fee in anticipation, and have promised me a future recompense on equally liberal terms, I have no wish to prove treacherous."

" The next portion of our agreement," continued Mrs. Ranger, " is that the child, should it survive — "

" Ah! " interrupted the doctor, his countenance suddenly assuming a look diabolically sinister, " then it is resolved that the child may live if it can? "

" Oh, was the contrary ever mooted? " exclaimed Agatha, the horrible comprehension of the man's meaning flashing to her mind.

" Don't be silly, my dear," said Mrs. Ranger, impatiently. " Doctor Maravelli has only treated the matter in a business-like point of view. Besides, on the Continent they are not quite so particular as they are in England. It is therefore agreed," she continued, " that if the child lives it is to be brought hither immediately after its birth, by you, doctor, and to be duly entrusted by you to certain persons of good character, though humble means, who will rear the child tenderly and properly. And in consideration thereof, the said persons are to receive twenty-five louis d'or, annually. Lastly, be it observed that I have already placed in your hands, doctor, a retaining fee of fifty louis d'or, and a further fee of the same amount is to be paid you on the occasion

when your services, which are thus retained, shall have been duly rendered."

" You have stated the case, madam, with the same precision in which I have already agreed to every one of its details. Save and except," continued Doctor Maravelli, " that you have omitted to specify how the annual stipend of twenty-five louis d'or is to be paid for the maintenance of the child."

" Through your own bankers," said Mrs. Ranger, " as you will undertake to keep an eye upon the child, so that should it live and its parents at any time be desirous of claiming it, the wish may be at once gratified by application to you."

" These are the conditions," observed the doctor, " and I on my part consent to them all. I hope that my fair patient, who has listened to this discourse, is satisfied? " and he turned with a sort of sycophantic courtesy toward Agatha, who liked his manner as little as might be.

But ere she had time to give any answer, a bell was heard to ring in the hall, and the doctor, as if seized with a sudden uneasiness, started from his chair, listened attentively, then sat down again, trying to look composed, and then once more sprang from his seat with increasing restlessness.

" Excuse me for a few minutes," he said. " It is the gate-bell — and I think I can guess — "

Then, without saying any more, he bowed to the two veiled ladies and abruptly quitted the room.

" Something is wrong, I do not like his manner, what can it be? " said Agatha, in a hasty whisper, and now speaking to Mrs. Ranger in English, for all the conversation with the doctor had been carried on in the French language.

" Oh, 'tis nothing," answered Agatha's companion, in the same hushed and subdued tone. " You can judge full well, by all he has undertaken for us, that he is not excessively nice or particular, and it may be he is now receiving some visitors on an errand belonging to the same species, though perhaps not precisely of the same form or fashion as our own."

" Hush! " said Agatha, whose terrors sharpened all her faculties, " there are voices whispering outside, and, oh, the doctor has left the door ajar! Doubtless 'twas in his agitation, — for agitated he assuredly was, — and therefore I do not think that it was any ordinary visitor he was ex-

pecting, or any detail of his wonted routine of business that he fancied himself called upon to transact. Hush!" again whispered Agatha, and impelled by an irresistible curiosity, she approached the door to listen.

"How can you be so foolish?" exclaimed Mrs. Ranger, who, however, somewhat catching the infection of her young companion's fears, rose up from her seat and joined her at the door.

And now both of them listened with suspended breath to catch the slightest word or sound that might reveal the mystery of the doctor's recent agitation, and of the scene — whatever it were — that was now passing in the hall.

"You are full early to-night, Robert," said Maravelli, in a voice which, though subdued, nevertheless reached the ears of the two ladies.

"It is not always easy to pick and choose one's own time," answered a rough voice, "and we fishers of men must take home the booty that our nets bring up as soon as caught, or else 'tis apt to turn putrid," and the fellow indulged in a coarse chuckle which sounded hideous and ominous through the hall.

"Hush! hush! I have patients there," said the doctor. "But whom have you in your company?"

"Hernani the Italian and Walden the Switzer," was the response, again given in the rough voice which had before spoken and which no doubt belonged to the individual whom the doctor had addressed as Kobolt. "Here they are, getting the fish in out of the cart. Come now, dame Mavolta, bring the light nearer. There! down with it upon the floor, comrades, and then you can be off to get the cart away back to the shed. But of course you will mind what answers ye give the police if ye happen to encounter them."

"Ay, ay," replied two other voices, most probably those of Hernani and Walden. "But here's the fish," — and almost at the same instant Agatha and Mrs. Ranger heard something fall, like a heavy inert mass, upon the stone pavement of the hall; and the sound struck upon their ears dull and ominous, as if it were that of a corpse, making their blood run cold and their limbs tremble.

Fain would they have raised their veils and peeped forth from the parlour door to clear up the horrible suspicion which had arisen in their minds, and thus relieve themselves

of the fearful uncertainty that had seized upon them. But the doctor might return every moment; he was but a few yards distant on the other side of that door, which they dared not open an inch wider lest it should grate on its hinges and betray their eavesdropping.

"Now then, comrades, be off," said the hoarse voice of Kobolt. "I will remain to help the doctor lift his prize to an inner room, and receive the gold pieces. In half an hour I will join you at our usual place of meeting."

"All right," responded the two voices which had previously given utterance to brief monosyllables, and the front door was then heard to open and close gently.

"Now be quick," said the doctor, in a sharp impatient tone. "Let us clear this away, or those who are waiting for me will begin to consider my absence most extraordinary."

With a still more poignant curiosity and a still keener attention, if possible, did Agatha and Mrs. Ranger continue to listen inside the parlour; and now upon their ears slowly crept a sound as if that same heavy object which they had previously heard thrown down in the hall was being dragged over the stone floor.

"Be quiet, fool that you are," said the doctor, angrily. "We must lift it, I tell you. That noise can be heard. Lift it, I say."

And then, as Agatha and Mrs. Ranger staggered back to their seats, overcome by the force of horrible suspicions now reduced almost to a certainty, they heard the quick footsteps of Maravelli and Kobolt retreating along the hall with the peculiar tread of men carrying something awkward and heavy between them. An inner door then opened and shut, and all was still.

"Heavens! what is the meaning of this?" murmured Agatha, who felt as if she were about to faint. "Terrible thoughts are agitating in my brain."

"Terrible, indeed," said Mrs. Ranger, her whole form shivering with a cold shudder. "But we must compose ourselves, we must collect our courage, we must not let the doctor think we have been spying his actions. There! I will shut the door close."

Thus speaking, she rose from her seat and secured the door gently; then, hastening back to Agatha's side, she

said, in a low and rapid voice, " For Heaven's sake! subdue your emotions. We must not let him suspect that we have even caught the faintest idea of this scene. Besides, all is settled between him and us, and we will take our departure the moment he returns."

Scarcely had Mrs. Ranger finished speaking, when Maravelli reëntered the parlour, and by the rapid glance which he threw upon his two veiled visitants, it was apparent enough that he sought to ascertain whether they had moved from their seats since he quitted the room. But inasmuch as the dark veils completely concealed their countenances from his view, — and there were no other appearances to cause him to suspect that they were labouring under any peculiar emotion, — the doctor evidently felt reassured upon the subject.

" Pardon my rudeness, ladies," he immediately said, " in having thus left you alone for even so short a space as five or six minutes. And now permit me to offer some slight refreshment — a glass of wine and a biscuit — which indeed I have already ordered my housekeeper to bring in."

" We thank you, doctor, for your kindness," said Mrs. Ranger, rendering her voice as composed as possible, " but we must take our departure promptly. I do not know that we have anything more to say: the bargain is struck, all the arrangements are well understood."

" And the most perfect secrecy shall be maintained," added Maravelli. " Permit me, ladies, to light you through the hall."

And officiously throwing open the parlour door, he allowed them to pass forth. But as he followed close behind with the lamp in his hand, the looks of Mrs. Ranger and Agatha, piercing through the thick folds of their veils, were instinctively flung upon the stone floor of the hall; and with a kind of shuddering recoil did they observe a long wet mark upon that pavement near the entrance, as if some bulky object saturated with water had been thrown down and then partially dragged along, and the wet had afterward been hurriedly mopped up.

Mrs. Ranger felt Agatha stagger against her, but in a quick, significant tone she said, " Take my arm, love," and the young lady, instantaneously made aware of the necessity of maintaining her presence of mind, shook off as well as

she was able the horrible sensations that had suddenly seized upon her. The next moment the front door was opened, the threshold was crossed, and wishing the doctor good night, the two ladies once more emerged into the long dark alley, which now seemed, if possible, more dismal than when they first entered it half an hour previously.

It was, however, a relief unspeakable both to Agatha and Mrs. Ranger to emerge into the fresh air from the atmosphere of the doctor's house, which for the last few minutes of their sojourn there had appeared to be fetid with the odour of the dead, and they retraced their way to the villa at a pace too rapid to afford opportunity for much connected discourse.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ANOTHER SCENE IN THE GARDEN

It was about a week after the incidents just related, and again, at the hour of sunset, must we look into the spacious grounds attached to the villa residence on the outskirt of Geneva. There, in one of the most secluded nooks of the enclosure, shall we behold Miss Julia Owen, — the youngest of the three sisters, — emerging from a shady avenue and looking hastily up and down the gravel walk which she now entered. Observing that the coast was clear, she continued her way toward a garden-seat placed against the boundary wall at the extremity of the gravel walk, and flinging herself on the bench, she consulted a watch which she took from her bosom.

"'Tis close upon the hour when he promised to meet me," she murmured to herself. "But wherefore is it that I am thus before the time? Ah! 'tis because I love him, because he is handsome, yes, nobly handsome."

And then the young lady suddenly gave the rein to her imagination, which was hot and fervid as that of her two elder sisters; and allowing her fancy thus to run riot in conjuring up the joys which she believed might be experienced in the arms of the individual whose image was uppermost in her thoughts, she became the prey to longings as ardent and desires as devouring as those of a Messalina.

Although it was the hour of sunset the heat was stifling; no breeze came from the mountains in the distance, nor ruffled the surface of the lake that lay sleeping tranquilly in its mighty bed. The frenetic fervour of Julia's unruly passions made the blood course with the fury of fever-heat in its crimson channels; and to obtain air she threw off her bonnet and shawl, thus remaining in the elegant evening

costume in which she had ere now issued from the dining-room. She felt that her cheeks were flushed, she knew that her eyes were swimming in a wanton languor, and as she bent down her looks she could catch the quick risings and sinkings of her bosom which the low-bodied dress revealed in most luxurious exposure. She therefore knew that at this moment she was beautiful, very beautiful, and wishing to produce a certain impression upon the mind as well as the senses of him whom she was expecting, she murmured between her coral lips, " I wish that he would come."

Scarcely was the desire thus expressed when the sound of footsteps on the other side of the wall reached her ears, and as she looked up she almost immediately encountered the fine dark eyes of him whose presence she was anxiously awaiting.

Standing upon the stump of a tree on the outer side of the wall, the lover was enabled thus to look over that barrier, and Julia, lightly springing upon the seat, thus raised herself to the same level. Then followed what was so truly natural when a gentleman half-scales a wall on one side and a lady does the same on the other: that is to say, their lips met in speedy contact and were glued together in one long delicious kiss.

" Dearest Julia, again am I rendered supremely happy! "

" And I, dearest Charles, am I not happy also? "

These were the first words that they exchanged, and their lips once more grew together, remaining in contact this time even longer than at first.

" May I not leap this wall and join you in the garden? " asked the Earl of Curzon, for he indeed was Julia's admirer.

The look which she flung upon him conveyed the answer even before her lips could frame one; and vaulting lightly over the wall, he stood on the garden seat by her side. Then as they sank down thereon to a sitting posture, he seized her in his arms, strained her with every appearance of the fondest rapture to his breast, and covered her cheeks, her lips, and her brow with kisses.

" When we parted yesterday, my dear Charles," said Julia, at length breaking the silence which had been sealed by such rapturous caresses, " you told me that you had something most important and most serious to speak to me about, and although I besought you to tell me then

what it was you had thus to communicate, you preferred that we should meet expressly for the purpose this evening."

"True, dearest girl," answered the earl, with his arm thrown around her slender waist and her head pillowed upon his shoulder, so that her brow rested against his cheek. "Because I wished by such an intimation to prepare your mind for the very serious subject whereon it now becomes necessary that we should discourse."

"Proceed, my dear Charles," said Julia, now gazing up into his countenance, "for I see by your looks that you have no evil intelligence to impart."

"I am not so sure that you will think so, Julia," replied the earl. "At all events listen."

"What! is it indeed so very serious?" she exclaimed, now showing signs of uneasiness. "Oh, am I about to waken from a delicious dream, a dream of love — "

"Only to make that dream a reality, if you choose," interrupted Lord Curzon, once more straining her to his breast.

"Oh, with this assurance I am already consoled, I am already happy," exclaimed Julia, lavishing upon him the tenderest caresses, so that he would indeed have been but little experienced in the female character were he not able to comprehend that he had only to seek the crowning bliss when he chose in order to obtain it.

"Two months have now elapsed, my dearest Julia," he resumed, as he retained her, all vibrating with desire, in his arms, "since first we encountered each other. Beneath the glorious sun of Italy, in the peerless city of Milan, did I first meet you, and the moment my eyes singled you out, as it were, from the midst of the royal retinue, I thought to myself that it would be happiness supreme to win the love of such a bewitching creature as thou. You remember how I subsequently introduced myself, how you repulsed me at first, then how you were led to look more favourably upon me."

"Yes, because I saw that you were handsome, and that your manners were fascinating," observed Julia, in a low tremulous voice. "From the very first moment I was interested in you, but I dared not all on a sudden receive the advances of a stranger. But when you told me who

you were and besought me to give you a hearing, did I refuse you? "

"No, I have not the slightest complaint of cruelty to make against you," responded the Earl of Curzon. "On the contrary, in revealing my name, it was reminding you also of the disadvantage under which I laboured in thus addressing a young lady."

"You mean," observed Julia, with a tender look, "that at the same time you made yourself know to me, it of course occurred to my recollection that there was such a lady as the Countess of Curzon in existence, and that therefore you were married. But even then, did I prove cruel, did I repulse you, did I flee from your presence? No. Nevertheless, had I behaved as woman ought, — not perhaps always as woman does, — I should have assumed a haughty air and an indignant look, and have demanded by what right you, a married man, dared venture to breathe the language of flattery, when evidently meant as a prelude to the more tender whisperings of love, in the ears of a young lady, unmarried, occupying an honourable post about the person of the Princess of Wales. Oh, in such terms as these would I have addressed you, Charles, had it not been that my heart was smitten by a sentiment which, in its very weakness, was stronger than that of womanly prudence and propriety. But what must you think of me for this conduct on my part? What can your opinion be of one who has encouraged you to follow her from Italy, through Switzerland, hither to Geneva? "

"What is my opinion? " exclaimed the earl. "It is that you are adorable, and that I adore you; it is that so much love on your part deserves every possible manifestation of love on mine; it is that inasmuch as you have been prepared to make such sacrifices for me, there is no sacrifice which I ought to hesitate to make for you! For in loving me, you love one who cannot conduct you to the altar, you love one who cannot give you the honoured name of wife. And in loving me, also, you place yourself in a position to preclude an honourable marriage with any other suitor who may present himself. Your love then for me, if you abandon yourself to it entirely, amounts to what the world will call your ruin, and therefore, if you are indeed prepared to make these tremendous sacrifices for me, what should

not I do for you? You renounce the chance of obtaining a husband who would love, cherish, and protect you, and I therefore must renounce the wife whom I possess. This, then, is the serious matter concerning which I was so anxious to speak to you. It was to propose that, if you be as sincere as I am, as sincere as I think you, we at once resolve to renounce all the world for each other."

"Oh, this language pours like a flood of Elysian rapture into my heart," exclaimed Julia, in tones of thrilling joyousness. "Yes, for my part I will renounce all and everything for thee," and she pressed herself closer to the earl, as if willing and anxious to abandon herself to him then and there, so as to crown the tender compact.

"Dearest, dearest Julia," he said, lavishing upon her caresses as tender as those which she expended upon him were wanton and provocative, "now you are holding out to me hopes of ineffable bliss. But" — and his voice suddenly sank to a low and mysterious whisper — "it is not merely the sacrifice of your honour, Julia, which is involved in all this; it is the sacrifice of all your future prospects, your family, sisters, friends, position, hopes of aggrandizement."

"I do not think that I altogether understand you, Charles," said the young lady, now fixing upon him a look of mingled doubt and uneasiness. "Pray explain yourself. Already is suspense amounting to an agony."

"I mean, then, dearest Julia," answered the Earl of Curzon, "that the sacrifice we make for each other must be complete. You must fly away with me from Geneva, you must abandon everybody and everything, in order to be mine wholly, and only mine."

"What! and live with you openly as your mistress?" exclaimed Julia, astonished but not shocked, amazed but not indignant.

"Most assuredly," responded the earl. "But you have put my meaning into words more plainly explicit than any I should have ventured to use. It is better, however, that the matter should thus be placed on a perfectly intelligible footing. I love you, Julia, I have already convinced you that I love you. For the last two months I have followed you from place to place, and in order not to compromise you in any way, or to have it even suspected that I was

hanging on the outskirts of the princess's retinue, as it were, I have submitted to some annoyances and humiliations. Travelling in a humble style, adopting a feigned name, burying myself in an obscure lodging at Geneva, remaining cooped up in that lonely place nearly all the day long in order to avoid recognition on the part of any English persons who might happen to be sojourning in the city or passing through it, stealing out only along with the bats and owls of an evening, sometimes fortunate enough to meet you alone, at others compelled to content myself with beholding you at a distance, or else to return home again disappointed at not meeting you at all, in fact, playing a hide-and-seek game in which all the advantages of rank and money are totally absorbed, and a complete barrier raised between myself and every legitimate pleasure and enjoyment, save and except when in your society, — and then indeed," he added, in a softer tone, " am I amply rewarded."

" Oh, I am aware, dearest Charles, of the sacrifices you have thus made for me," exclaimed Julia, " but you must not blame me if I cannot always either keep an appointment or withdraw myself from immediate attendance upon her Royal Highness — "

" Blame you, no, dearest! I do not blame you," interrupted the earl. " But what I mean you to understand is, that the sort of life I have lately been leading cannot possibly continue. Though my love is illimitable, my patience is not proportionate. Now then, can you not understand wherefore I said at the beginning of this interview that the topic of our discourse would be a serious one? Indeed, the time is come for us to take some decisive step."

" And that decisive step? " said Julia, gazing upon him with mingled uneasiness and mournful affection.

" I have already explained it to you, my dear girl," answered Curzon. " It is that you will accompany me hence, that you will fly away, resign your position in the household of the princess, and abandon everything for my sake."

" No, no, I cannot do all this! " cried Julia, with an affected excitement, but with a real feeling of anguish, for she had taught herself to love the Earl of Curzon. " I cannot abandon my post here. For your sake, yes, assuredly

I would, Heaven knows I would. But there are other reasons, other considerations — "

And she stopped suddenly short as the wild rapidity of her emotions was about to hurry her upon delicate ground.

" Then you do not love me, Julia, as I love you," exclaimed the earl. " Farewell, farewell! "

Rising abruptly from the bench, he stooped down, imprinted a kiss upon the forehead of the bewildered girl, and leaping on the back of the seat, vaulted over the wall.

" Farewell, farewell! " he once more exclaimed from the opposite side, and then his retreating steps smote upon Julia's ear.

Now she felt, all in an instant, that she loved him madly, with a passion which she fancied to be altogether independent of the mere sensuality of desire, and springing upon the garden seat, she looked over the wall, waving her handkerchief with frantic gestures, for she had presence of mind sufficient to make her aware how dangerous it would be to call after him by name.

He turned his head, he saw her, and he retraced his steps. Another minute, and he was again standing on the stump of the tree on the other side of the wall. Once more, too, were their hands locked in a warm clasp.

" Could you leave me thus, Charles? " she murmured, in a tremulous tone.

" Need I repeat, dear Julia, all that I have said to you this evening? " he asked. " If you love me you will fly hence with me. It is impossible that I can continue this existence of mingled excitement and despondency, light and darkness, bliss in your society, and long hours of loneliness in an obscure lodging, prowling, lurking, and sneaking about like a robber — No, no, I cannot endure it! Say then, will you be mine, wholly mine, or shall we separate at once and for ever? "

Thus speaking the Earl of Curzon bent down his head and pressed his lips to Julia's hand, and during the few moments that thus elapsed a myriad thoughts swept through her brain.

Should she abandon all the dreams of ambition for this love of hers? Should she give up the brilliancies of a court life for the obscurities of a nobleman's mistress? Should she do a temporary violence to her feelings now, by resigning

her lover, or, to gratify her passion, should she perhaps plunge into a career of continuous vexations, annoyances, and troubles? Such were the questions that rushed through her mind, worldly thoughts strangely commingling with woman's deepest feelings. But all of a sudden it struck her that the best course would be to gain a delay, and she resolved to make the endeavour.

"Well, Julia, what is your decision?" asked the Earl of Curzon, again raising his head and looking her anxiously in the face.

"There must be mutual concessions," she answered. Then, bending down her eyes and with a blush of soft sensuousness rising to her cheeks, she murmured, "I am yours now, your wife, your mistress, or whatever title you choose to give me, but you must allow me a short time, say a few weeks, a month, at the least, to make certain arrangements here, ere I can possibly leave — "

"Arrangements! What arrangements can you possibly have to make, Julia?" exclaimed the earl, with an air of surprise. "I hope that you do not intend to reveal the secret of our love to a living soul?"

"Not for worlds!" answered Julia. "But — I cannot be explicit now; another time, perhaps — "

"Julia," said the earl, in a tone of reproach, "you have secrets from me. Yes, that blush upon your cheek confirms my suspicions — But fool that I am!" he suddenly exclaimed, "what right have I to expect your confidence under present circumstances? Tell me, Julia, if I consent to your proposal, if I agree to prolong my hide-and-seek sojourn in Geneva for another month, will you give me your entire confidence, tell me everything?"

"I will, I will," answered Julia, pressing his hand to her lips. "Oh, now you have made me so happy, so very, very happy! You have promised to grant me a month ere I leave the princess for ever to become your mistress openly."

"And in the meantime," said the earl, in a subdued voice and with a look so full of wicked meaning that Julia's eyes sank beneath it, though rather to veil the ineffable joy that thrilled through her than from any sense of shame which she experienced, "in the meantime, dearest, you will grant me the privileges of that love which exists be-

tween us and which places us on the same footing as man and wife — "

But we need not extend this chapter to any greater length. Suffice it to say that in the same way as her sister had done toward Colonel Malpas did Julia Owen murmuringly breathe the requisite instructions to the Earl of Curzon how to obtain admission to her chamber that night at an hour when there need be no fear of observation.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE EARL'S LODGING

It was yet dark, but fast verging toward the dawn, when the Earl of Curzon stole forth from the villa, and hastily threading the garden, scaled the wall at the very spot where the bench was so conveniently situated within, and the stump of the tree so suitably placed without. On thus stealthily quitting the grounds, he skirted the wall for some short distance with a view to gain that by-road which led through the fields to Geneva, and which Mrs. Ranger and Agatha took on the night of their visit to Doctor Maravelli.

But just as he reached that road, the morning broke suddenly above the eastern heights, and the Orient heaven became all in a moment so beautifully streaked with orange and purple and crimson and gold, that the earl paused to survey the spectacle. And so glorious was it that it even chased from his mind the pleasing sensations which a night of rapture in Julia's arms had left behind. All on a sudden, however, his admiring reverie was interrupted by the opening of the private door in the wall looking upon the narrow road. A tall individual, wearing a cloak, issued forth, and the earl, throwing upon him a rapid sidelong look, was about to hurry away when the glimpse which he thus caught of that person's features made him gaze again more scrutinizingly still. Then, startled with astonishment, he ejaculated within himself, "By Heaven! 'tis Malpas, or I never saw him before in all my life."

Again the earl looked, and this third survey convinced him that it was indeed the colonel, although divested of his moustache and looking stouter and better than he had ever seemed before. And Malpas it assuredly was, as the

reader may easily suppose; nor was his astonishment less at thus beholding the earl than was the earl's on recognizing him. It was evident that Malpas, taken too much by surprise to hasten off, in the first instance, or conceal his face in the collar of his cloak, was now irresolute what course to adopt, whether to accost the earl or to beat a retreat, while, on the other hand, Curzon himself was equally undecided what line of conduct to pursue.

With all his faults, — and the reader knows they are many, — Curzon entertained a boundless contempt for the paltry and rascally conduct which Malpas had shown in his endeavour to obtain the six thousand guineas wagered at the memorable "banquet of six." Moreover, he beheld in Malpas the paramour of his wife, the author of that dishonour which he felt so keenly, but of which he had no positive proof. Without recapitulating causes, however, suffice it to say that for many reasons the Earl of Curzon hated and detested Colonel Malpas, and under ordinary circumstances he would either have passed him by with supreme contempt, or else have picked a quarrel with him for the purpose of avenging the sense of dishonouring wrong that rankled in his heart. All this, however, would have been very well in London, where it was quite natural for the earl and the colonel to meet a dozen times in a week, but here, in such a far distant place as the city of Geneva, it was altogether another thing. Besides, Colonel Malpas had just issued stealthily forth from the villa, and Curzon was seized with an irresistible curiosity to penetrate not only into the cause of Malpas's presence at Geneva, but more especially of his evident intimacy at the residence of the Princess of Wales.

"Can it be possible that his mission is the same as mine, and springing from the same authority?" murmured the earl, hastily, to himself, and without any further hesitation, he at once accosted the colonel, saying, "It would be useless to pretend not to recognize each other."

"Well, now I receive the confirmation of a suspicion," ejaculated Malpas.

"And what is that suspicion?" demanded Curzon, in surprise.

"That I have once or twice seen you from a distance lurking about the villa."

"Ah! then you must also have been lurking about this same villa," interrupted the earl. "Come, I see that it is better you and I should have some little explanation with each other. At all events, let us not be seen loitering here now, since the day is dawning grandly. Does your road lie toward Geneva?"

"It does," responded Malpas, but he hesitated for a moment, and looked uneasily toward the garden door from which he had just issued.

"I see what you mean," exclaimed the earl, instantly comprehending the cause of the colonel's confusion. "The key which gave you egress is still in your hand, and you have something to do with it. Come, do not mind me. Place it according to any previous understanding that may have existed between yourself and the lady who lent it to you."

The colonel laughed significantly, as he observed, "Perhaps the good luck which you have experienced induces you to suspect the nature of mine, and maybe you also have just issued from the villa, though by means of some other mode of egress?"

"Put by the key," said the earl, somewhat impatiently, "and we will talk of these matters anon."

Colonel Malpas accordingly, and without any further hesitation, now deposited the key under the door, and having done this, he accompanied the earl away from the vicinage of the villa.

"Will it not appear strange," said Curzon, suddenly, when they had got to a little distance along the road through the fields, "if you and I are seen entering Geneva together at such an unseemly hour? Perhaps you will come at eight o'clock and breakfast with me. We can then talk over such matters as we may choose to introduce upon the tapis."

"Be it so," said Colonel Malpas. "The police are vigilant and strict."

"Yes, and especially as I happen to be living here under a false name."

"'Tis exactly the same with myself!" cried Malpas.

"Then all the better reason wherefore we should avoid any unnecessary discussions with the police," observed Curzon, "especially as the syndics are very severe toward all foreigners having false passports. I am passing under

the common and euphonious name of Mr. Smith, and here is the card of my address. You can join me there at eight o'clock."

"Punctually," rejoined Malpas, "and when your servant announces Mr. Thompson, you may know that it means me."

They then separated, the Earl of Curzon diverging across the fields, and Colonel Malpas continuing his way along the road. And here we may observe that it was only with a sort of cool politeness, and not with the familiarity of former times, that his lordship had demeaned himself toward the colonel, who, on the other hand, was so rejoiced to find that he was not "cut" by one of the most aristocratic of his old acquaintances, that he would not for a moment perceive there was anything at all reserved or distant in the nobleman's manner.

But we shall now follow the Earl of Curzon. In ten minutes he entered Geneva, and striking into a neighbourhood which, if not exactly low, at all events was very far from being one of the most aristocratic quarters, he presently knocked at the door of a house of plain and decent appearance. After being kept waiting for some time, the inmates of the dwelling not being up, as it was still very early in the morning, the nobleman was admitted by a pretty-looking and mischievous-eyed Genevese girl of about eighteen, and who had just hurried on a sufficiency of raiment to develop rather than to conceal the symmetry of her charming form. The earl cast upon her a look of sly meaning, thereby proving that they were not altogether the worst friends in the world, and muttering something about having been kept up all night in attendance upon a sick friend, he passed into a small but neatly furnished parlour, which, together with a still smaller but equally cleanly bedroom at the back, constituted his lodging.

Having given the pretty Genevese some hurried commands relative to preparations for breakfast at eight o'clock, and also with regard to the prompt admission of a certain Mr. Thompson when he should call, his lordship (who, be it remembered, was plain Mr. Smith at this lodging) proceeded to refresh himself with his wonted ablutions and perform his morning toilet. Meanwhile he revolved in his mind the manner in which he ought to proceed toward Malpas and

the extent to which it would be prudent to confide in him; but he found, upon reflection, that these were points which must be left to the dictation of circumstances, and would materially depend upon the amount of knowledge which the colonel himself possessed with regard to the business in which he was engaged on the Continent.

Punctually at eight o'clock did Malpas make his appearance, and as he entered the earl's neat little parlour, he exclaimed, "Ah! I can understand the attraction which has fixed you at this humble tenement. By Heaven! such a pair of bright eyes, such coral lips, such pearly teeth, and such a roguish smile — "

"Hush!" said Curzon, "the girl understands a little English. But come, sit down," he continued, in a somewhat more friendly tone than he had adopted ere now, "and if your appetite be as good as mine, you cannot fail to do justice to this admirable specimen of a Swiss breakfast."

"My morning's walk has indeed sharpened my appetite," said Malpas, as he seated himself at the table, "and really — humble though your lodging be — the service of the board is conducted in a superior style."

The nobleman and his guest now proceeded to do ample justice to the cutlets, the fresh eggs, the fish, the rolls, and the coffee; and when the repast was concluded, the earl said, "Now, Malpas, we will have a little serious conversation, if you please."

"I think it is highly necessary, after the singularity of our encounter this morning at sunrise," observed the colonel.

"But let us begin with a complete and thorough understanding of the principles on which it is to be conducted," resumed the earl. "I mean to say, shall we throw off all reserve and give each other our entire confidence?"

"I scarcely know how to answer that question," replied Malpas, looking at the earl in a peculiar manner. "Do you mean with regard to this morning's adventure?"

"I mean with regard to everything," replied the earl; "not only what we were both doing at the villa this morning, but what we are doing at Geneva at all."

"Then you must suspect something?" said Malpas, determined to proceed guardedly, in case the earl should have merely been delegated by a certain person in London

to put his (the colonel's) trustworthiness and fidelity to the test.

"Yes, I do suspect something," responded Curzon, with a significant look, "and this is that you and I are both engaged in the same mission, although perhaps we were not aware of each other's connection with the business until this morning."

"You have spoken exactly my sentiments," said Malpas.

"Shall we then give each other our confidence?" asked Lord Curzon.

"I have no objection, provided you can show me that I am safe in doing so —"

"Ah!" ejaculated the earl, "I understand you. On embarking in this enterprise you pledged yourself to secrecy —"

"Just so," rejoined Malpas, "and it is that secrecy which I am now afraid of violating."

"Perdition!" exclaimed the earl, petulantly. "I was not aware that you were such a stickler for principle. But come, this fencing with each other is a mere idle waste of time," continued Lord Curzon, suddenly adopting a milder tone, "for we are sure to come to the point at last. I also have pledged myself to secrecy in this matter, and therefore whatever amount of confidence we may show each other, we are alike guilty of breach of faith toward our employer, alike incur the same chance of that employer's displeasure, and alike stand the same risk of being betrayed by the other."

"True," said Malpas, "and therefore let us advance by equal steps along the road of explanations so that we shall soon ascertain whether we keep pace with each other in the details of the knowledge which we may each possess relative to the nature, aim, and object of our present missions."

"Your proposition is a reasonable one," said the Earl of Curzon. "And now, by way of making a start, I will confess that the employer to whom I have alluded is Lady Sackville."

"Mine also," responded Malpas, "and when I undertook the mission, her ladyship enjoined me to observe the strictest secrecy concerning it to whomsoever I might meet abroad, and likewise to shun as much as possible any of my English acquaintances whom I might chance to encounter."

"The same instructions were given to me," resumed Curzon, "coupled with the earnest recommendation to carry on all my proceedings with the stealthiness of a spy and the secrecy of a bravo, to prefer lurkings and watchings by night to any espials by day, to take a feigned name, preserve a strict *incognito*, live humbly and lodge obscurely, so as to avoid attracting especial notice, and carefully refrain from communication with any one who, being in a position to recognize me, might mention the fact on writing to friends in England."

"All these tally perfectly with my instructions," observed Malpas. "The object of this mission of mine is a most delicate one. I set out from England with orders to repair to the south of Europe, ascertain where her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales was residing at the time, and by some means or other form an acquaintance with one of three young ladies — "

"The Misses Owen," added Curzon. "My instructions were precisely the same. I had already heard something of that Owen family, although personally unacquainted with either of the ladies; and I was not altogether surprised when Lady Sackville assured me that these three sisters are anything but patterns of virtue. Her ladyship accordingly led me to expect that I should probably experience but little difficulty in forming an intimate acquaintance with one of them, whichever it were that accident might first throw in my way — "

"All these representations were likewise made to me," interrupted Malpas; "and, indeed, I have found that every syllable Lady Sackville uttered relative to the Owens, that is to say, judging by the beautiful Emma — "

"And I, judging by the tender and somewhat sentimental Julia," observed the nobleman, "in whose arms I experienced Elysian raptures during the past night — "

"Then were we close neighbours," continued Malpas, "for Emma told me that her room was next to Julia's, and in Emma's arms have I been sleeping for the last seven nights."

"I know not how you fared with your Emma," resumed the Earl of Curzon, "but I am afraid that I shall have some difficulty in bending Miss Julia to my purposes."

"My instructions were to some extent of a twofold

character," observed Malpas, taking up the thread of the discourse in his turn. " Lady Sackville directed me either to insinuate myself completely into the confidence of one of these Owen girls, glean from her all the secret proceedings of herself and sisters, and frustrate to the best of my endeavour those designs which should militate against the welfare and interestss of the Princess of Wales."

" Or else," resumed the earl, " if you could not succeed in winning the confidence of one of the Misses Owen, you were to take a bold and desperate step toward your fair one, — I mean nothing less than persuading her to elope with you."

" True! " ejaculated Malpas, " those were precisely the instructions which I received from Lady Sackville, and it is easy to comprehend that yours were exactly the same. But, for my part, I have made but little progress with Miss Emma in any other matter than that of love. In amorous play and wanton sport she is proficient enough, nor indeed am I the first tutor the benefit of those training she has enjoyed in that respect. On the contrary, the true pattern of a court beauty is she, all wickedness and no virtue, a maid of honour in name only, a perfect demirep even at her tender age."

" I cannot give my Julia a much better character," remarked the Earl of Curzon, " save and except that I must do the girl credit for the endeavour to conceal her natural wantonness as much as possible. Besides, I really do believe that she loves me, and, to tell you the truth, I entertain something more than a mere transient passion for her. Not that I actually love her in the true sense of the word, but I like her, and should be by no means sorry to have her as a mistress for six months or so. But until yesterday I could never even contrive to give the conversation such a turn as to make her admit that she had certain secrets which she kept from me, and from her manner I am afraid that I shall have much trouble in extracting any revelations at all. I have proposed that she shall elope with me, but she has insisted upon a month's delay."

" As for Emma, when I ventured to speak to her about her position in the princess's household," resumed Malpas, " with the hope of drawing her into a conversation upon the subject, she has always avoided the discourse in some mis-

chievously mirthful manner, and when I have proposed, since we have grown particularly intimate during the past week, that she should fly away with me, she has burst out laughing in my face, with an inquiry why we cannot be just as happy in each other's arms beneath the roof of the villa as in any dwelling-place to which I might propose to transport her? Thus stands the affair with me, and after more than three months' absence from England, during which I have been for upwards of nine weeks dancing attendance on Miss Emma, the real and actual business of my mission remains just where it was."

"And I am bound to make precisely the same admission," observed the earl. "Now it is quite clear that Lady Sackville is friendly to the Princess of Wales."

"No doubt," exclaimed Malpas, "and she is aware of certain covert designs which are entertained against her Royal Highness's peace and comfort. Of those designs it is evident enough that the three Owens are the instruments and agents, and it is either to paralyze their efforts while they are in the princess's service, or else to remove two of them altogether from the sphere of their mischievous intents, that you and I have been entrusted with our present missions."

"You have put the whole affair into a nutshell, so far as explanation goes," remarked the Earl of Curzon, "and it is quite clear that as the business is of the most delicate, peculiar, and even curious nature, Lady Sackville adopted every precaution to prevent you and me from making any revelations to each other or comparing notes on the subject. But there is the third sister Agatha, I wonder whether any steps have been taken toward her — "

"Perhaps not," remarked Malpas; "at all events it may be supposed that Lady Sackville, in laying her plans, calculated that either you or I would be certain to glean the secrets of these sisters through the medium of at least one of them, and thereby frustrate all proceedings in any way hostile to the princess."

"Or else," remarked the earl, "Lady Sackville perhaps calculated that if you and I succeeded in persuading two of the sisters to elope with us, the one who was left would be rendered powerless for mischief when deprived of the aid of her sister accomplices."

"Thus far," said Malpas, "our confessions have advanced

concurrently, step by step, on either side. For my part I do not mind adding that when my mission is over, whichever way it may end, I shall look for a handsome reward. Of course if I am to end by persuading Miss Emma to elope with me and become my mistress altogether openly, and avowedly, somebody must furnish me with the means of keeping her; and who is to do this if not the lady at whose instigation I shall incur such an encumbrance? "

" Then I am to understand," remarked Curzon, " that you have had no specific reward promised you? I am in the same position; I have stipulated for nothing, but have left matters to Venetia's generosity. Of course she can obtain everything she asks for from the prince, and I do not think that a marquisate, with some good sinecure of three or four thousand a year, will be too much for all the anxiety, trouble, and annoyance I am undergoing. As for Julia, it would be necessary to provide for her hereafter, should she become my mistress openly; and of course Venetia will furnish the means for all this."

" Lady Sackville must do it," observed Malpas, his lip curling with a peculiar smile of malignant triumph, " for do you not see, Curzon, that she has placed herself entirely in our power? In the course which she is pursuing she is secretly befriending the Princess of Wales, and therefore she is opposing herself to the prince."

" Yes," exclaimed Curzon. " But I do not suppose that you will find it necessary to use threats or coercion toward Lady Sackville in order to obtain a suitable recompense for your present services. But, by the bye, was it she who released you from your little difficulties? And if so, how on earth did you manage to insinuate yourself again into her favour? "

" Oh, I managed to make my peace with her," exclaimed Malpas, assuming a self-sufficient air. " But as for the way I got out of the King's Bench," he continued, inwardly chuckling at the idea of being asked the question by the husband of the very woman who had transmitted him the means for the purpose, " that was of course done through my own resources."

" Well, well, we need not wander away from the immediate topic of our discourse," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon. " From all that has now taken place between us, it is pretty

clear that our mission on the Continent is the same, that we are acting according to the instructions of the same employer, and that our pursuits, in fact, have become identical. Perhaps, all things considered, we may further our views by consulting each other, and to a certain extent acting in concert, although of course it must remain a profound secret from everybody that we have thus met. Not a word to Emma on your side, not a word to Julia on mine; and in our communications with Lady Sackville — for I presume you write to her occasionally, as I also do — not a syllable must slip from the pen calculated to betray the circumstance of our meeting and the good understanding which has resulted. In more ways than one we may serve each other's views."

"Assuredly so," responded Malpas, inwardly rejoicing at being thus restored to so friendly a footing with the Earl of Curzon. "And now let us deliberate upon the best manner in which we can proceed, so as to bring the business wherein we are concerned to a speedy issue."

"That is an aim most sincerely to be desired," ejaculated Curzon, "for I am heartily sick of the hide-and-seek existence which I am leading, and were it not for present consolation in the shape of the charming Julia's favours, and the hope of future reward, I do not think that I could prosecute the business much further. But what can you suggest? How can we possibly compel either of these sisters to be explicit as to their secret proceedings?"

"Our course is a difficult one," remarked Malpas. "Lady Sackville especially declared that she would not have me adopt direct and positive measures to expose these girls to the princess."

"Neither would I do so," said Curzon, emphatically. "I would not treacherously betray Julia to her mistress, and thus cause the ignominious dismissal of the poor girl; but I would discover her secrets, if possible, in order to frustrate the designs thus revealed. Or else — which is much better — I should like to contrive something that would bring matters to a crisis at once, and compel Emma to elope with you and Julia with me, so that the necessity should cease for this lurking, stealthy, sneaking, hole-and-corner kind of existence, and that it should have an end."

"Well, then, let us lay our heads together and see what

we can think of," remarked Colonel Malpas, drawing his chair in a confidential manner still more closely to that of the Earl of Curzon.

But here we must leave Venetia's two emissaries for the present, to discuss their plans, while we transport the reader's attention back to England.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE MAID OF HONOUR

It will be remembered that amongst the letters which Venetia examined on the occasion when she received the pearls from Lord Leveson was one written by Miss Bathurst strongly recommending the necessity of making immediate provision for Mrs. Arbuthnot and her daughter Penelope. Lady Sackville had accordingly used her influence with the prince for this purpose, and the result was the appointment of Mrs. Arbuthnot to fill a vacancy which occurred in the queen's household by the resignation of Lady Prescott, and the subsequent nomination of Miss Penelope to the post of maid of honour likewise in the queen's establishment.

Lady Prescott had resigned her situation of bedchamber woman shortly after the scene at Lady Wenlock's, some particulars of which had got noised abroad; and thus was it that Mrs. Arbuthnot had been enabled to slide gently and comfortably into that berth. Behold therefore this lady and her daughter Penelope now fairly inducted into a court life, through the influence of Venetia, with good salaries and handsome apartments at Windsor Castle.

Mrs. Arbuthnot was a woman who had long lived by being toady, duenna, or companion to those into whose households she could obtain recommendations, or into whose favour she could ingratiate herself, and thus it was a most important event for her to obtain so good a situation as the one above mentioned. Thoroughly worldly-minded, and having too long been compelled to live upon her " wits " to have retained much of her originally good principles, she considered self-interest to be the dominant aim of existence; and when she gazed upon her daughter it was with the hope that she would make the best of the oppor-

tunity now afforded her to contract some advantageous marriage, or form some still more valuable connection. For, be it understood that Mrs. Arbuthnot was one of those detestable mothers who would sooner see their daughters become the mistresses of rich men than the wives of poor ones; and Mrs. Arbuthnot did not fail to recommend Penelope to do her best to attract the notice of the royal princes, no matter which one, — but the prince regent himself, if possible.

Miss Penelope was somewhat terrified by the manner in which her mother thus addressed her, for Mrs. Arbuthnot did not deem it necessary to adopt much ambiguity of language when inculcating her worldly doctrines. The young lady, being past twenty-five years of age, was quite old enough to understand her mother's meaning, and quite virtuous enough to recoil from it. She had little maudlin sentimentalism about her, and no prudery, but was not sufficiently depraved in mind to be willing to surrender up her person to the first princely bidder. The " innate virtue of the woman " was not totally spoilt within her, although she had been placed in situations that fully opened her eyes to the intrigues and immoralities of fashionable life. She herself had however remained pure in body, and only partially contaminated in mind, and at all events, as we have before observed, she possessed a sufficient amount of proper feeling to render her heartily ashamed of the base and almost undisguised recommendations proffered by her mother.

In personal appearance, Penelope was not exactly beautiful, nor yet handsome; but she was a fine young woman, with a well-developed figure, an animated countenance, luxuriant hair, and large bright eyes. She moreover possessed a brilliant set of teeth, a pair of ripe red lips, whence the most luscious kisses might to all appearances be culled, and a clear healthy complexion. Her voice was flutelike and well calculated to stir up the amorous emotions of the susceptible temperament; her arms were somewhat too robust for perfect symmetry, but splendidly rounded and brilliantly polished, and her feet and ankles were equally faultless in their sculptural perfection, though evidently belonging to limbs that were largely and even massively formed. Her bust was on the same fine scale, the bosoms

being large without luxuriance, and full without any detriment to their firmness. There was a certain animation in her looks which might be mistaken at a first glance for boldness, but a close and steadier survey would show that it was only the liveliness of good spirits, commingling as it were with the thoughts that naturally belonged to the experience of a young woman who was already verging toward the ripe age of twenty-six.

Such was Penelope Arbuthnot, and when dressed in the tasteful elegance of her walking costume, with the long ringlets showering down from under the brims of a large fashionable bonnet, or arranged in the splendour of satin or velvet when her toilet for the dinner-table or the evening party was completed, the new maid of honour was of striking and brilliant appearance. Indeed, as she occupied her place at the royal dinner-table, or moved amidst the gay throng in the gilded saloon, she would have been pronounced a handsome woman by even a critical observer, and thus without actual perfection of features, but with only a tolerable regularity of profile, she was calculated to pass as one of the most brilliant ornaments of the court and fashion.

The prince regent had lately visited Windsor Castle much oftener than had previously been his wont, because he was now very seriously thinking of finding a husband for his daughter the Princess Charlotte, whose character was daily developing a higher spirit and a growing impatience of control. Being resolved to marry her offhand, it became necessary for the prince to make a fitting selection of a husband for her; and in this very important matter was it requisite that he should hold frequent consultations with his mother the queen. Hence those numerous visits to Windsor which he had recently paid, and on these occasions he had been led to take special notice of Penelope.

When once the prince regent fixed his eyes upon a woman, it was with the resolve to possess her, and to this end was his mind always made up whenever the fancy struck him, even before he had bestowed a single reflection upon the means whereby his determination was to be carried out. As for being contented with one mistress, — even though this mistress was the most transcendently beautiful woman that had ever yet shone in the circles of fashion, — the idea was altogether out of the question, for when once away

from Carlton House and beyond the influence of Venetia's smiles, the prince regent was as much inclined as ever to fulfil his destiny as the most insatiate and unprincipled voluptuary that ever disgraced the world.

It was now the middle of the month of March, at about the same time that the events occurred at Geneva, and the weather in England was more than usually bleak and tempestuous. Thus was it that on one particular day the prince regent, having driven over at an early hour from London to Windsor, found himself compelled to remain longer than he had intended in consequence of a sudden deluge of rain. Although he had made arrangements to return to Carlton House to hold a Privy Council, and afterward to entertain a party at dinner, he declared " that both the right honourable councillors and the invited guests might go to the devil, sooner than he would run the chance of being dragged, even in a close carriage, along flooded roads and with the rain beating strong enough to drive in the windows." He accordingly remained to pass the day at Windsor Castle, and as in the evening there were no guests at the dinner-table, — merely the queen, the Princess Augusta, the ladies, lords, and gentlemen of her Majesty's household, — the prince was enabled to place himself next to Penelope. The king, who was more than usually mad just at this period, and was prone to the performance of strange unkingly antics, was kept close in his own private apartment, and the Princess Charlotte, the prince regent's daughter, being somewhat indisposed, also remained in her own chamber.

The circle at the royal dinner-table was therefore limited upon this occasion, and the prince, being thus enabled the more easily to throw off all unnecessary ceremonial restraint, gave way to those gaieties of conversation in which he excelled so much. Penelope not only possessed a natural flow of good spirits, but was also quick, sprightly, and ready-witted in her discourse, and she therefore shone on the present occasion to considerable advantage. The prince was more than ever pleased with her, and as he beheld the colour heightening upon her cheeks, enhancing the animation of her looks, and pouring additional floods of lustre into her fine eyes, he thought within himself that he had often taken the trouble to make a less worthy and desirable conquest than this.

Penelope, however, was perfectly innocent in thus developing her attractive qualities in so provocative a manner toward the prince. She had no ulterior design, she did not even lay herself out to attract his notice; her behaviour was the natural and unstudied outpouring of good spirits, sufficiently tempered by proper taste and breeding. But at length, when she beheld the prince's eyes settling with a peculiar look upon her, after the champagne had been handed to him three or four times, she instantaneously comprehended that it was quite possible for him to have put a wrong construction on her demeanour and discourse. She saw how the unaffected frankness of the former and the spontaneous sprightliness of the latter might receive an evil interpretation in the mind of a man who was himself too much saturated with impure notions to be able to give others credit for innocence and purity of purpose, and when, flinging her eyes across the table, Penelope beheld her mother gazing upon her with a satisfaction the nature of which was not to be mistaken, the young lady experienced a sudden shock that produced, as it were, a complete revulsion of feeling within her.

She, however, had too much good taste as well as self-possession to turn suddenly cold or distant, but she nevertheless gradually diminished the sprightliness of her conversation, while the blooming animation of her countenance proportionately yielded to a modest composure. The prince was too keen and sagacious in such matters not to perceive that her spirits had received a sudden chill, and he did his best to rally her, but she now replied with only a calm courtesy; and soon afterward the queen, rising to retire from the drawing-room, was of course followed thither by all the ladies, Penelope being thus relieved from the embarrassment which she had experienced for the last quarter of an hour.

The prince, who scarcely ever neglected his bottle even for the finest woman in existence, remained at table drinking with the lords and gentlemen of the royal household, but presently they repaired to the drawing-room, to rejoin the queen and the ladies in attendance. On entering the spacious and gorgeously furnished saloon, the prince looked hastily around in search of Penelope, and, to his chagrin, he observed that she was occupying a seat as close as possible

to the queen, so that even if he accosted her, he could not possibly breathe the slightest syllable in her ear without being overheard by his prim, starch, vinegar-looking mother. But alone on a sofa, at a considerable distance from the fire around which the rest of the royal party had gathered, Mrs. Arbuthnot was seated, and the prince, as if in a kindly, patronizing courtesy toward an elderly lady, went and placed himself by her side.

"Mrs. Arbuthnot," he said, throwing into his manner all the affability that was one of the ingredients of the hypocrisy which he knew so well how to assume for his own purposes, "I was much delighted in having the opportunity to use my influence with my august mother, and obtain for you that post which Lady Prescott so suddenly vacated."

"And I am charmed," responded Mrs. Arbuthnot, "in having this opportunity of expressing to your Royal Highness the lively sense of gratitude which I experience for the favour thus shown to me, and likewise I must avail myself of the present occasion to thank you with equal sincerity on behalf of my daughter, for whom your Royal Highness was also graciously pleased to use your influence."

"Ah! your daughter, to be sure!" said the prince, affecting to be reminded of what was full well known to him already. "That handsome young lady who sat next to me at the dinner-table just now is your daughter — I recollect. By the bye, she was at Carlton House along with you, my dear madam, that night when we had the private theatricals."

"To be sure, your Royal Highness," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Well, but I do not think that we all behaved very properly on that occasion, did we?" said the prince. "After supper, if I remember right, there was some kissing and toying."

"Oh, yes, a little," observed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "But wherever your Royal Highness is, everybody is so gay and happy."

"Yes, but if your daughter is unmarried, and at her age, too," said the prince, lowering his tone, "that kind of amusement is rather dangerous. Kisses, you know, my dear Mrs. Arbuthnot, are the flowers which one gathers on the threshold of paradise, but the bold and venturous one

often follows up the advantage, and taking Elysium, as it were, by storm, plucks the forbidden fruit."

"I can assure you, sir," replied Mrs. Arbuthnot, "that my daughter, without being a prude, remember, is a young woman of prudence."

"No doubt of it, Mrs. Arbuthnot," interrupted the prince, "but — "

"And I was going to observe," continued the lady, "that although such little kissing and toying and trifling dalliances to which your Royal Highness has alluded may smooth down all the asperities of a woman's virtue, yet still the virtue itself may remain intact."

"Though deprived of some of its strongest defences, eh? Is that your meaning, my dear madam?" inquired the prince, laughing, though speaking in a low and guarded tone.

"I think that such was my meaning," responded Mrs. Arbuthnot, also smiling, but with a sort of subdued significancy.

"How is it, my dear madam," asked the prince, "that you have not managed to find a husband for your daughter yet?"

"Really your Royal Highness should direct Parliament to levy a tax upon bachelors," answered the bedchamber woman, again smiling. "But it is strange, considering that Penelope has moved in the very best society, that she is highly accomplished, and, as your Royal Highness perceives, is not ill-looking."

"Ill-looking!" he echoed. "On the contrary, she is a very fine girl, a very fine girl, or young woman, rather, — between five or six and twenty, I should say, if it were not rude to guess a lady's age, ripe as the peach."

"As her mother, sir, I feel proud at the compliment that you thus pay my daughter, and though I say it who am her parent, she is decidedly one of the finest figures I ever saw. Her milliner assured me this morning — But really, your Royal Highness must think me very indiscreet," said the wily woman, suddenly interrupting herself, and appearing to be much shocked at the idea of having committed a sad solecism in propriety and decency.

"Pray go on," said the prince. "You were speaking with the very pardonable pride of a mother, and it pleases

me to hear a fond and affectionate parent thus discourse. Pray go on, I repeat. You were telling me that your daughter's milliner passed some opinion? No doubt it was to the effect that Miss Penelope is one of the best made young ladies — "

"Now, to speak candidly, it was an observation to that effect," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, who from the corner of her eye was attentively watching all the evidences of those rising passions which she was thus methodically and cunningly provoking on the part of the prince. Then, as she observed the colour deepening on his cheeks, the salacious sucking of his lips, and the gloating expression with which his eyes plunged across the room to fix themselves upon Penelope, she continued, in a low and confidential whisper, "Indeed, sir, the milliner declared that of all the ladies belonging to the court and aristocracy who patronize her establishment, not one is so symmetrically and at the same time so finely formed as my daughter."

"You should marry her, you should marry her," said the prince, in the hurried tone of his aroused desires. "It would be a positive sin to suffer such a splendid creature to stand the chance of dying an old maid."

"It is easy to say marry her," remarked the astute Mrs. Arbuthnot, "but it is not so easy to procure a good match, and sooner than she should become the wife of a poor or obscure individual — "

"Ah! I perceive you are a lady of great prudence," observed the prince, now beginning to entertain a faint suspicion that it was not altogether without a motive that Mrs. Arbuthnot had struck into this somewhat extraordinary line of discourse. But determined at once to put her to the test and ascertain whether his suspicion was well founded or not, he said, in a low voice, and fixing a peculiar look upon her, "Some very prudent and careful mammas prefer that their daughters should be rich men's mistresses than poor men's wives."

"The morality may be bad," returned Mrs. Arbuthnot, perfectly unabashed, "but the worldly wisdom of the maxim cannot be disputed."

"Are you really serious in this observation?" inquired the prince, with a certain purpose still more plainly written in his look.

" I can assure you, sir, I never was more serious in my life," responded the wily woman.

" But the maxim may be only one which you recommend to others," urged the prince, " without perhaps any intention of practising it yourself? "

" Then were my sincerity indeed something to be impugned," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot. " But 'tis otherwise. What I preach I am prepared to practise."

" And if some one were to put you to the test? " said the prince, in a still more confidential tone than before.

" It all depends on whom the person might be," was the immediate response.

" Let us suppose a case," resumed his Royal Highness. " We will, then, for argument's sake, imagine that one of my brothers, a prince of the blood royal, should make overtures to Miss Penelope. As a matter of course, it could not be for her to become his wife, — it must be to make her his mistress. Now, what would be the answer in such a case? "

" I cannot positively declare what my daughter's response would be," returned Mrs. Arbuthnot, " but I know very well that if I were consulted in the matter I should not only give my advice, but also use my influence to compel an affirmative reply."

" Now indeed may we soon understand each other," said his Royal Highness, speaking quickly and in a tone of excitement. " Let us suppose that instead of being one of my brothers who made the overture whereof we have spoken, it was I, the prince regent, who ventured to breathe such a proposition in your ears relative to your handsome daughter Penelope."

" I should consent at once and unhesitatingly," answered the worldly-minded mother, for she saw full well that the prince regent was perfectly serious in what he said.

" Then, without another word, we understand each other," rejoined his Royal Highness, fixing upon her a look of the deepest meaning. " This night — "

" Yes, this night, if your Royal Highness wills it," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot, in a low but firm voice. Then after a few moments' hesitation, she said, " Her Majesty will doubtless retire early, as is her wont, and immediately afterward I will represent to my daughter the honour which your Royal Highness intends her. Then if you will await me here,

or in any other room, I will rejoin your Royal Highness as speedily as possible."

"Good!" said the prince. "But do you not observe how the handsome Penelope regards us at this moment? Is there not a certain uneasiness, a certain suspicion, in her looks?"

"Yes, there may be," replied the mother, "for I have already assured you, sir, that Penelope is a virtuous young woman."

"Though perhaps more or less prepared to lose her virtue when somewhat hardly pressed," added the prince. "But here, within the walls of this castle, she is completely in my power. We will try persuasion first, and if that will not do, then force must be resorted to. But if you, as her mother, give your consent — "

"Let us hope that Penelope will too well appreciate the honour that is intended her," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "not to receive your Royal Highness with suitable respect."

Then for some few minutes longer did the vile woman and the voluptuous prince remain in deep and earnest discourse, until all the details of the infamous bargain were fully settled and the terms were fixed whereupon the mother was to surrender her daughter into the arms of the royal voluptuary.

CHAPTER XL

THE MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

It was eleven o'clock. The queen had retired to her suite of apartments, attended by those ladies whose turn it was to wait upon her that night, while Penelope, withdrawing to her own chamber, was closely followed by her mother.

The bedroom allotted to the maid of honour was at the end of a long passage, and was situated in a somewhat retired position. It was in one of the oldest portions of the castle, and had a certain antique gloominess of appearance. The window was small, the walls were thick, and as the floor was below the level of the corridor communicating therewith there was a descent of two or three steps into the room. Altogether, it fully answered the description of one of those chambers which the imagination of the romance writer or novelist loves to envelop in loneliness and mystery, but until this particular night Penelope had experienced no apprehension with regard to the secluded position and cheerless aspect of her apartment.

"Mother," said the young lady, the moment she and her parent entered the room, "I know not how it is, but I feel a presentiment of evil creeping over me," and she looked very hard in Mrs. Arbuthnot's face.

"Nonsense, my dear girl!" exclaimed the wily woman. "So far from evil threatening you, fortune is preparing to shed its golden beams upon your head."

"Ah!" ejaculated Penelope, with that abruptness of tone and sharp, quick movement of the head which showed that from her mother's words she had just received the confirmation of a suspicion which had been haunting her all the latter part of the evening. "But perhaps you will explain yourself?" she added, with assumed coldness.

"Penelope," responded her mother, "if you were a girl of sixteen or seventeen, I should experience some difficulty in entering upon a certain topic, but as you have reached an age at which your experience is to a certain extent matured, I need scarcely adopt any sophistry or circumlocution in order to explain my meaning. Besides, you have already comprehended it — I see by your manner that you have."

"Yes, I am indeed fearful that I have," replied the maid of honour, "and if my suspicion be true, if my surmise be correct, oh, then it will be a sad and fatal hour for me, for it will teach me to despise and contemn, perhaps even to hate, my own mother."

"Penelope, this is ridiculous, this is preposterous, this is absurd on your part," exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "It is impossible that you can in reality be so squeamish. When I had you up from the country, first of all, to pass a few days with me at Acacia Cottage, did I not explain to you for what purpose I had been placed as a companion and duenna about the person of Venetia Trelawney, as Lady Sackville then was? Did I not tell you that it was destined for her to become the mistress of the prince, to the consummation of which aim all arrangements were then tending? And did you not appear to envy Venetia the brilliant position which her friends were endeavouring to obtain for her? Did you not, moreover, aid me in flattering and complimenting her? Did you not also assist me in performing the part of a spy upon her actions, so as to prevent the probability of her escape from that track in which she was a mere puppet moving according to the will of those who secretly pulled the strings? Did you not, I ask, enter with spirit into all the proceedings whereof I am now speaking?"

"True!" cried Penelope, with evident impatience. Then flinging her flashing looks upon Mrs. Arbuthnot, she exclaimed, "But all that is no reason why my own mother should make a bargain to sell me to the Prince of Wales!"

"Foolish girl!" immediately rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot, "do you mean to spurn the hand which fortune extends toward you? Pause for a moment and reflect. You have now an opportunity of rising to rank and fortune, like Venetia."

"Ay, but Venetia was prudent enough to marry beforehand," cried Penelope, "and thus make the nuptial garment

a cloak for her amour with his Royal Highness. Now, understand me well, mother. Were I married to a complaisant husband, like Horace, for instance, I should most probably tread precisely in Venetia's path if the opportunity were afforded, but I will not consent to be bought and sold in the manner which the prince and yourself seem to have settled between you. Remember, the consequences of an amour to an unmarried woman may be disgrace and ruin. If Venetia should become a mother, there is a legitimate father for her child, but if my surrender were to involve me in such an embarrassment, should I not be ruined altogether? Besides, once for all, my mind revolts from the idea of being thus handed over to the arms of a sensualist, and thus you see, mother, I have quite prudence and virtue enough to tell you frankly that I am not yet prepared to become the mistress of the prince."

"Again I say that you are a foolish, self-willed girl," exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot, angrily. "Totally blind to your own interests, you will not listen to reason. Here you are, nearly twenty-six years of age, still unmarried, and still without a suitor for your hand. Although handsome, you are now no chicken, my dear, and being fortuneless, you have no special attraction to induce any rich nobleman to make you his wife. Believe me, then, your prospects with regard to marriage are by no means brilliant under present circumstances. As for your virtue, it is no recommendation now, because few will give you credit for possessing it at your age. But suppose you yield to the solicitations of the prince, suppose that you become his mistress, we should take care to have the circumstance whispered about, and then many a younger son of the nobility will be anxious to secure your hand. Thus what you may call your loss of virtue would no doubt end in procuring you an excellent match, and thus also, by the sacrifice of your honour, will you exhibit the real prudence of a woman of the world."

"No, I cannot, I will not yield to this base and degrading sophistry!" exclaimed Penelope. "Now, mother, leave me. Another word from your lips upon this subject, and I shall hate you."

"But, my dear Penelope," argued the vile woman, "do listen to reason."

"God forgive you, mother, for thus seeking to prostitute

your own daughter!" said the young lady, the tears running down her cheeks.

"Ah! you weep, my child, you weep?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot, a sudden thought inspiring her with a diabolic prompting how to turn this emotion on her daughter's part to serve the infamous purpose she had in view. "Yes, you weep, I say. But far more bitter will be your tears when you behold your mother suddenly stricken down by a misfortune the consequences of which will redound upon your own head."

"A misfortune!" ejaculated Penelope. "What mean you?"

"I mean, daughter," replied Mrs. Arbuthnot, "that I am threatened by a remorseless creditor, a creditor for a large sum, contracted some years ago. You remember when I was compelled to break up our establishment in Harley Street?"

"Yes, yes," said Penelope, in the quick and excited tone of suspense. "Go on, mother, go on."

"Well, this creditor of whom I speak had lost sight of me until within these last few weeks, but now, perceiving my name in the Court Circular, he has found me out, he has been to the castle, and he has declared that if within a week I pay him not the amount, he will have me dragged away to prison."

"Heavens, the threatened disgrace!" ejaculated Penelope, in consternation.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, now appearing to sob bitterly, "it would be my ruin, my utter ruin, and yours also, unfortunate girl! You know how particular, how very particular the queen is, and she would at once dismiss me from my situation. Then, how could you possibly retain yours? The sense of degradation and of shame would compel you to resign. You could not possibly remain at court while all the world knew that your mother was the inmate of a debtors' gaol."

"But this debt, mother," exclaimed Penelope, with increasing excitement, "what is the amount?"

"Nearly four thousand pounds, with the interest," was the response, and Mrs. Arbuthnot continued to sob and rock herself to and fro on the chair in which she was seated.

"Four thousand pounds!" ejaculated Penelope, frightened at the magnitude of the debt. "And must it all be raised

at one moment? Can we not mortgage our salaries, or a portion of them?"

"If we could, how should we be enabled to maintain our position at court?" demanded Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Would you feel comfortable in being pointed at as shabby? Would you like to appear constantly in the same dresses, faded silks, soiled satins, dirty gloves? No, no, it is ridiculous. Besides, even if all this were possible, the creditor will not wait; he is merciless. A warrant is already issued against me, and the bailiffs will come to-morrow."

"Good heavens, can all this be true?" cried Penelope, now a prey to the deepest anguish.

"True," exclaimed her mother, with a start of apparent indignation and surprise. "Do you think that I would thus torture your feelings for mere amusement? But stop, I will fetch from my own room certain letters which will prove — "

"Enough, mother, I believe you," said Penelope, her momentary incredulity suddenly dissipating in the presence of Mrs. Arbuthnot's tone, look, and manner. "But have you not applied to any of your friends? Lady Sackville, Miss Bathurst, Mrs. Fitzherbert — "

"My dear Penelope, I have applied to them all, and they cannot assist me. I am reduced to despair, and hence was it, — I know not exactly how it happened that the discourse gradually took the turn it did, — but thus was it, I say, that I listened to the words which the prince ere now breathed in my ears relative to yourself. For he declares that you are handsome, that he loves you, that he will seek opportunities of conferring all possible favours upon you, and that the individual whom self-interest may induce to become your husband shall have honours, titles, and pensions heaped upon him. Thus may you, Penelope, become the rival of Lady Sackville; thus also may the husband whom you are certain to obtain, rise to a high position, like Lord Sackville."

"Enough, mother," exclaimed Penelope, appearing to be nerved with the sudden courage of a desperate resolve. "My mind is made up, that is to say, if the prince, as I suppose, will relieve you from your embarrassment?"

"I have already told you as much," hastily responded her mother. "And therefore you consent?" she demanded, eagerly and greedily.

" Yes, I consent," answered Penelope, in a low voice, while upon her cheeks the colour went and came in rapid transitions. " 'Tis better that I should do this than that we should both be ruined; 'tis better that I should make the sacrifice of all my most delicate feelings than that we should be plunged into the depths of poverty."

" Ah! now you speak like a woman of sense," exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. Then, inclining toward her daughter, so that her lips nearly touched the young lady's ear, she said, in a low and rapid voice, " But when the prince comes to your chamber in a few minutes let him not be received with coldness and reserve. Be not unto him inanimate and passionless as a marble statue."

" Oh, leave me, leave me, mother! " exclaimed the young lady, shuddering all over with the deepest sense of humiliation and shame. " There is something dreadful — ay, even horrible — in hearing such injunctions come from the lips of a parent. Let it suffice that I sacrifice myself — "

" Well, well, I will say no more," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot; then hastily imprinting a kiss upon her daughter's cheek, she hurried from the chamber to carry the tidings of her success to the prince regent, who was impatiently awaiting her coming in the drawing-room where the evening had been spent by the royal party.

So soon as her mother had withdrawn, Penelope began to lay aside her apparel. She was armed as it were with the fortitude of a desperate resolution. Having made up her mind to the worst, she abandoned herself to the current of what appeared to be her destiny, or, rather, to the control of the strong compulsion that ruled her with an imperious necessity. In such a mood did she gather up and arrange the masses of her luxuriant hair for the night, and when in a state of seminudity she seated herself upon the couch to divest herself of her remaining apparel, she could not help clasping her hands with a sudden paroxysm of anguish at the thought of all the circumstances under which she was about to surrender herself into the arms of the princely voluptuary.

But at the same moment the door was gently opened, and his Royal Highness entered the chamber of the maid of honour.

The moment he flung his gaze upon Penelope, he devoured as it were all her charms with that rapid burning look. He

beheld her indeed as finely formed as her wily mother had more than intimated that she was; and as the wing of the bird sweeps over the surface of the sea, thus passing from wave to wave with whirlwind speed, so did the glance of the royal sensualist travel quick from charm to charm, from contour to contour, from shoulders of firmness and whiteness to breasts still more plump and dazzling, rising like two swelling globes from the surface of an ample chest, well divided, rich in their sculptural proportions, without being too luxuriant, and each crowned with a delicate rose-bud. Thence did his looks sweep along the white and well-rounded arms so admirably modelled in their robustness, so glowing and warm even in their whiteness, and belonging to a figure which, though somewhat largely proportioned, was perfectly symmetrical, and all the flowing outlines of which were developed by the drapery that hung loosely about it. Nor were the prince's eyes averted or arrested in that first sweeping glance, ere they had likewise embraced the statuesque moulding of the lower limbs, so full and robust where fulness and robustness were proper, so slender where the well-turned ankles required much slenderness, and with the shapely feet so long and narrow.

Notwithstanding her hands were joined and her looks were mournful, when the eye of the prince thus rapidly scanned all the charms that were more than half-exposed, there was nevertheless a kind of languid voluptuousness which hung at the moment about that young woman, and which at once seized like the intoxicating influence of highly perfumed flowers upon the senses of the prince, so that his brain appeared to reel for a moment as he paused upon one of the descending steps. But the next instant he sprang forward, he caught her in his embrace, he pressed her in his arms, and murmuring some tender syllables, he covered her with his caresses.

CHAPTER XLI

ABJECT GREATNESS

It was about two o'clock in the morning, and all was silence throughout Windsor Castle. Penelope, maid of honour now only in name, slept in the arms of the prince regent, and the lamp which burned upon the table in her chamber shed its flickering beams on the flushed countenance of his Royal Highness and also on the carnation-tinted cheeks of his new mistress.

On the features of the latter this crimson glow was the blush of mingled joy and of shame, of pleasure and of pain, of ineffable enjoyment and of deep regret, which had lingered there even after slumber had steeped her senses in the blissful confusion of the dreams that perpetuated to some extent the feelings just previously experienced. It was the blush of beauty and of love which sits upon the rose even when in close contact with its attendant thorn; it was the blush which suffused the countenance of Eve when, having gathered the fruit of the tree of knowledge, she cast her eyes upon herself and saw that she was naked.

Sweetly and serenely did Penelope appear to be slumbering. The rich fringes of her closed eyes lay upon her cheeks, forming dark boundaries, as it were, between the dazzling white of the eyelid above and the deep carnation which glowed on the plump flesh below. Her lips, slightly apart, seemed yet moist with the kisses which had been pressed upon them, and as they revealed the pearly teeth which lay within, the effect was that of the white seeds shining amidst the red and pulpy richness of a tropical fruit which in its ripeness has burst open. The light of the lamp also fell upon the bosom which, totally exposed, rose and fell with the long, gradual, and apparently measured undulations

that accompany the respiring action of a woman who sleeps soundly, tranquilly, and well; and while one arm lay beneath the prince's head, the other reposed outside the coverlid, the entire abandonment of Penelope's posture thus forming a charming picture for the novelist to describe or the painter to delineate.

Though deep was the carnation upon her cheeks, yet was it also delicate and pure, a wholesome and a healthful bloom, like the vermeil upon the peach or the flush of the morning along the Orient sky. But of a coarser, ruddier, and still deeper hue was the redness which sat upon the countenance of the prince, a redness arising from animal passions in all their utter grossness, and which borrowed the depth of its colouring as much from the wine-press of Bacchus as from the roseate bowers of Venus. Such was the contrast presented by the sleeping pair. Yet safely may we argue that in the newly experienced raptures of passion the anger of Penelope at thus being sold and bought was well-nigh absorbed, and, at all events, in the dreams which now followed there was more of pleasurable emotion than of pain and mortification.

It was two o'clock, we said, and all was silent throughout Windsor Castle. But, hark! that stillness, a moment before so profound, is now disturbed, though faintly, by the tread of footsteps. Whence do they come? From a distant chamber of the castle. But whither are they now tending? Quickly and excitedly do they advance along the corridor, whence the apartments of several of the younger damsels open, and at the far end of which is situate the chamber of Penelope Arbuthnot. But who is it that thus threads that passage with such agitated steps? 'Tis an old man, of middle height, stout, wearing an old-fashioned wig, enveloped in a dressing-gown which he holds around him, and with his naked feet thrust into a pair of red morocco slippers. His eyes are open, but does he walk in his sleep, or is he actually awake? At all events, singular, or, rather, fearful and horrible, are the variable expressions which his countenance takes, in changing and rapid reflex of the thoughts that are sweeping through his mind. In his eyes may at one moment be seen the wild glare of maniac ferocity, at another the inane vacancy of dull idiocy.

Who is this old man that thus wanders through the castle

at such an hour, and on whose features the rays of the lamps suspended at intervals fling their beams with such hideous effects? We shall see presently. But whither goes he? He places his hand upon the latch of Penelope's door, which the prince, in his ardour to embrace his new conquest, had forgotten to secure when he first entered, and which she herself, in the confusion attendant upon that entrance of her royal suitor, had likewise forgotten to fasten. Therefore the door yields to that old man's touch. He enters, he closes it behind him, and he approaches the couch.

An ejaculation burst from his lips as he beheld the prince regent in the arms of the maid of honour, and at that ejaculation both the occupants of the couch awoke with a sudden start from their slumber. And simultaneous ejaculations of mingled surprise, terror, and dismay burst also from their lips as in this visitor who had thus disturbed them they recognized the king.

"Good God, my father!" said the prince regent, while Penelope, after the first cry of alarm had burst from her lips and the first glance of recognition flashed from her eyes, hastened to bury herself beneath the bedclothes, in a confusion, horror, and bewilderment of feeling more readily conceived than described.

And no wonder that such should have been the state of mind into which she was so suddenly thrown on thus beholding his Majesty George III standing by her bedside. For, as we have already hinted in previous chapters, the king was at this time a confirmed and hopeless lunatic, his madness developing itself in various phases, sometimes mischievous, sometimes tranquil, now indicative of the most brutal and ferocious instincts, now displaying extreme docility and mildness, now breaking forth into the most ludicrous freaks and absurd antics, then melting into pathos or sinking down into complete lethargy. That on the present occasion he had escaped from the supervision of those who were appointed to attend upon him, and that, having wandered about the castle, he had found his way, either by accident or through some motive of maniac cunning, to Penelope's room, were convictions that instantaneously struck both this lady and her royal paramour. That some violence was to be apprehended, or that disturbance and exposure would take place, were the thoughts which likewise flashed simul-

taneously to their minds, but as these feelings operated in different ways upon each, it occurred that while Penelope hastily buried herself beneath the bedclothes, where she lay breathless in terror and suspense, the prince made a movement to spring from the couch with the intention of getting his father as noiselessly as possible out of the room.

" Lie still, sir! " instantaneously cried the king, anticipating his son's intent and pushing him back with that sudden exercise of strength which madmen often display to a degree apparently far beyond their natural powers. " Lie still, sir! 'Tis well we have met thus. They told me you were here to-night, and I resolved to seek you. For a long, long time past I have wanted to talk to you tranquilly and quietly, but either you don't come near me when I am disengaged, or else when you do come those cursed people by whom I am surrounded will not let me see you. Now, sir, lie still, I say, or, by Heaven, I will make you, and listen to what I have to say."

Thus speaking, the king took a chair, drew it to the side of the bed, and seating himself, gazed with a most remarkable expression of mingled horror, wildness, and sorrow upon his son.

On the other hand, the prince regent himself looked earnestly and affrightedly up into his father's countenance, to ascertain whether it was in a lucid interval that the old man thus sought him out and addressed him so seriously, or whether, having merely stumbled upon him by accident, his Majesty began giving utterance to any random things that were uppermost in his brain at the instant.

" My dear son," resumed the old king, bending down and speaking in a low voice, and with looks full of mysterious horror, but evidently without taking the slightest notice of the fair form that lay huddled up under the bedclothes by the prince's side, " my dear son, I have long wanted to talk seriously to you. I have had strange dreams of late. Terrible things have sat heavily upon my thoughts; monsters, spectres, apparitions, and shapes of every variety of horror have been haunting me. What could it all mean? Heavens! what appalling objects have I beheld! What shocking things have they whispered in my ears! Ghost of Hannah Lightfoot, wherefore dost thou trouble me? Yes, 'tis true, I know that I seduced thee under solemn pledges and sacred

promises. I know that I deceived thee, that I was a perjurer, a violator of my oaths. I know also that thou didst die of grief, and that I am thy murderer, yes, thy murderer."

And as the lunatic king thus spoke, he sprang up from his chair, turned around, and appeared to be addressing some object which imagination had previously placed behind him. The prince regent was appalled at the horror depicted in his father's looks and the imploring accents of rending anguish that marked his tone, while Penelope, under the influence of some unaccountable feeling of awful curiosity, deeply mingled with dread consternation, slowly peeped forth from beneath the bedclothes and remained with her eyes fixed upon the fearful spectacle presented by the miserable old king.

" Oh, what vulture-talons are these which fasten upon my brain? " continued the monarch, still apostrophizing the shadow which his disordered imagination conjured up. " Why dost thou thus pursue me, Hannah? Oh, wherefore with those hollow eyes of thine look out upon me from thy shroud? Ah! dost thou say that I clad thee ere thy time in that winding-sheet which enwraps thy form? O God! put off that garment of the grave, and come to me as was thy wont long years ago, when in the bloom of thy beauty and the springtide of our love. Avaunt, avaunt! stretch not out thy skeleton arms to me. Heavens! is it madness now that sears my brain? Oh, will not death relieve me from the earthly hell of this misery? But, ah! the sleep of death is often a hideous sleep, a sleep in which vampire wings wrap the soul around and vampire maws prey upon the heart. Oh, be satisfied, Hannah, I come to thee, I come. Inflame not with the terrors of thy looks the torments that are hurrying me to the grave. The woes of centuries have cumulated upon my soul, upon my head rests the gathered curse of ages. I know that I am a king, and the grandest triumphs have greeted me. Yet what dark gulfs and fathomless abysms exist in my soul, that all the light of England's diadem can never reach, much less fill."

Then, sinking with the exhaustion of his tensely wrung emotions, the wretched old king fell back into the chair by the side of the couch, and buried his face in his hands.

Penelope, now somewhat recovering her presence of mind,

gently laid her fingers upon the prince regent's arm, and as he flung down his look upon her, her eyes asked, as eloquently as eyes could speak, " What is to be done? "

The prince placed his forefinger upon his lip, to recommend silence; then, in the lowest possible whisper, he said, " The dark mood is upon him; let his mind take its course."

At this moment a convulsive sob broke half-stifled and gaspingly from the very bottom of the old king's heart; then came another sob more piteous still, then another, and another, until his whole frame was convulsed with a rapid succession of these heart-wrung moans, while he rocked to and fro, with an irregular and painful motion, in the increasing agony of his grief. The prince gazed in mute horror. But as for Penelope, her blood ceased to flow, her breath to come, her pulse to beat. Her looks were fixed on that wretched specimen of humanity, that miserable personification of madness, anguish, and compunction, bearing the name of England's king. Oh, dark were the clouds upon that old monarch's mind, but fearfully and vividly did the lightnings of remorse flash through them. For suddenly, and with awful vehemence, did he cast himself on his knees, and, raising his wrinkled hands upward, he thus gave vent to the thoughts which were now dominant in his mind.

" Oh, where is the fountain of life, flowing with the blessed waters that can wash out the crimson stains of my many crimes? What hands shall give me the cold crystalline draught from the Lethean spring, to quench all these fiery memories which burn like scorpions in my brain? What power shall save myself and family from sweeping onward into the universal maelstrom of destruction? Behold, afar off, there is a land where nature is so lovely and sublime that the fairest scenery and the loftiest grandeurs of Europe are in comparison but as a painted panorama to the stupendous original. And into this land, across the western wave, did I send the bloodhounds of war. A great and a gallant people, dwelling in that land, did I seek to coerce with my tyrannies and to trample beneath the feet of my armed legions. But they arose in their might and their power, they threw off the yoke, and they raised up a man whose glory, whose honour, and whose fame eclipse the highest qualifications of all the kings of Europe. Yes, Washington,

thou, the simple citizen, without pedigree, without title, with nought but the rank of a hero and a patriot, hast thou placed thyself far above the mightiest monarchs of the world. And a voice comes to me through the night, like the whisper of a spirit or the dreaming of far-off waters, telling me that the age of kings is well-nigh past, and that of rulers like unto thee is near at hand. Ay, and that same voice tells me that when the nations shall level their execrations against kings, their voices shall also swell in a joyous pæan to honour thee, O Washington."

Low, mournful, and lugubrious had grown the voice of George III as he thus delivered himself, with a strange composure and an apparently perfect lucidness, of those thoughts which were uppermost in his mind, thoughts which, had he been really the master of his intellect, he would not have dared to let himself think, much less give serious utterance to them.

And now he began pacing backward and forward in the chamber, his steps agitated and uneven, his looks restless and wild, and the workings of his countenance truly horrible to contemplate. A deeper terror, a horror more intense than he had previously experienced, grew upon the prince regent as he sat up in the couch gazing upon his miserable father, while cowering down by his side, with her looks fixed, however, upon the same awful spectacle of human woe and degradation, lay Penelope, a dread sensation at her heart, as if she felt that the scene was a judgment upon her for her criminality of this night.

"Oh, horrors are multiplying upon me once more," spoke the wretched king, but now it was in the quick and broken voice of strongly excited feelings. "Whose shade is this that comes? It is not thine, oh, murdered, heart-broken Hannah Lightfoot. No, no, 'tis thine, Amelia, my beloved, my best beloved daughter. Oh, terrible was thy death! Never, never shall I forget the horrors of that last scene of thy young life. I behold, I see it now. I hear thy cries, thy self-reproaches, the anguished outpourings of thy remorse. Ah! what word is that which is most often on thy tongue? Incest. Yes, incest with thy brother, my son by poor Hannah Lightfoot. Oh, do not reproach me, Amelia; do not look thus upon me. Ah! what? Would'st thou declare that thine own father is thy murderer, that

'tis his crime which redounded with overwhelming effect upon thee? Oh, horror! tossed upon the wild waves of anguish, wretchedness, and despair, am I not sufficiently miserable? Ah! through the casement do I now behold that lovely moon, whose silver splendour has oft riveted my gaze amid the vigils of the long, long night when 'twas believed I slept. Strange, oh, most strange is the influence which that lovely crescent moon has upon me! Sometimes its rays seem to penetrate like ice-shafts, so cold, oh, so cold, through the very brain," and the king, stopping suddenly short before the casement as he gazed up into the heavens where hung the silver lamp of night, shuddered as he spoke. " Or else," he exclaimed, now abruptly raising his arms and pressing his hands to his brows, " or else the beams of yon moon pierce like fiery darts into my brain and thrill throughout the entire form, as if the heat of a lava stream were passing over me. But now, what is this new feeling which seizes upon my heart? Oh, the moon suddenly disappears, she is gone, a cloud has entombed her in its darkness."

With these words the king turned away from the window, and was again advancing toward the couch, when he started with indescribable horror as if some hideous spectral shape had suddenly risen up before him.

" Ah! 'tis a horrible fiend which I now behold," he exclaimed, in accents penetrated with ineffable agony, " and his name is Murder. He points to the east. Yes, yes, I behold the plains of India deluged with blood, the burning villages, the wailing population, the famine-stricken multitudes — oh, horror, horror! millions are perishing in that far-off Orient clime! And those are my armies that are thus doing the work of wholesale destruction. But 'tis I, yes, 'tis I, who sent those armies forth, and whose commands they have thus obeyed. In America, too, more wars, more desolation, more bloodshed, more burnings, more horrors. In Europe, too, war, war, nothing but war. Blood, slaughter, murder, and rapine. Oh, wretch that I am, 'tis I who have done it all; 'tis I who have sent the genius of destruction abroad. And they call me George the Good! Oh, the mockery, the hideous mockery, while that fiend, the fiend of Murder, stands there, claiming me as his comrade, and smiling upon me with the horrible distortions of his counte-

nance, yet smiling, nevertheless, after his demoniac fashion, smiling in gratitude upon me for the myriads of victims which I have offered up to his insatiate maw. And all these horrors which I have inflicted upon the world have been to gratify mine own ambition. O God! have I not been a scourge and a curse to the human race? Talk of Timour the Tartar, talk of Jinghis Khan, talk of Attila the Hun, talk of Napoleon Bonaparte himself, all these have been angels of forbearance, of mercy, and of humanity in comparison with me. But, ah! did I breathe Napoleon's name? Oh! 'tis then a presentiment of coming evil that has struck me."

With these words, and taking no further heed either of his son or of the lady whose bed that profligate son was sharing, the mad old king rushed from the room, leaving the door wide open behind him.

"I must follow my father," exclaimed the prince regent, springing from the couch.

"For Heaven's sake, be cautious! Remember what you are doing!" cried Penelope, seizing him by the arm. "Should any one see you go forth from this chamber, or even in the adjoining corridor at all—"

"True, true," said the prince regent, suddenly recollecting how necessary it was to observe proper precaution. Then, having hastily closed and bolted the door, he hurried back to Penelope's arms, murmuring, in a low voice, "Besides, on second thoughts, I would not for all the mad old fathers in the world abandon you, my charmer, one minute before it is necessary for us to part."

"But that scene with his Majesty, oh, was it not dreadful, dreadful?" whispered Penelope, shuddering from head to foot while clasped in the arms of her royal paramour.

"Think no more of it, my angel," responded the prince, and he sealed her lips with kisses.

A few more words will suffice to close this chapter. The king regained his own apartments without creating any further alarm in the castle, and, indeed, without having been missed by the persons specially charged with the care of his royal person. Without any fresh interruption, therefore, did the prince regent continue to enjoy the companionship of the handsome and now amorous Penelope until the

dawn of morning through the casement compelled him to leave the paradise of her arms and retrace his way stealthily back to his own chamber.

At the breakfast-table they met again, but Penelope had reached that age when a woman having committed a fault knows how to veil it, and thus, if the natural glow did for a moment deepen upon her cheeks as she met the eyes of the prince and received from him a look of gratitude for the night of bliss he had passed in her arms, that flush was as transitory as the remorse which the young lady felt for her criminality. Indeed, the barrier of her virtue being now completely broken down, and the last remaining stronghold of her purity having been effectually stormed, she was prepared to yield herself up to pleasing dreams of ambition and to all worldly aspirations. But scarcely had the royal party sat down to breakfast, when a messenger arrived at the castle with urgent despatches from London, and the moment the prince regent cast his eyes over the first of these letters, he sprang to his feet, exclaiming, " Perdition! Titan has broken loose again, and has escaped from his vulture, his chain, and his rock! "

" What mean you, George? " demanded the queen, trembling with the anxiety of suspense, for she saw that something strange or terrible had happened.

" I mean," responded the prince, in a voice indicative of great excitement, " I mean that Bonaparte has quitted Elba, has landed in France, and has been received with acclamation by the people. I mean also," he added, with a still stronger accentuation, " that King Louis has fled, and that Napoleon is again at the Tuileries."

The consternation of all present at the royal breakfast-table may be more easily conceived than described, and while every one began delivering hurried comments upon the startling announcements just made, to the utter oblivion of all the substantials constituting the morning meal, Penelope seized the opportunity to whisper in the prince's ear, " His Majesty's presentiment is fulfilled."

" Yes," responded the regent, now suddenly and forcibly struck by the words which were thus recalled to his mind and which his father had uttered in his wild ravings on the preceding night.

" I remember, he spoke of Napoleon Bonaparte, and the

prophetic spirit which inspired him at the time has thus received a strange justification. But now, in spite of all that he uttered besides, we must have war again, ay, and plenty of it also."

CHAPTER XLII

THE ERMINE CLOAK AND THE GREEN SILK HOOD

We broke off the preceding chapter in a manner which many of our readers will doubtless deem abrupt, but we did so for the express purpose of avoiding any further comment at least on that occasion, relative to the grand political changes and the frenzied succession of startling incidents which were about to occur upon the Continent. We deemed it sufficient to note in its proper place the receipt of the intelligence in England of the entrance of Napoleon into Paris, and we now resume the thread of our narrative.

Let us suppose a month to have elapsed since the occurrences just related, and we must again request the reader to turn his attention to the little republic of Geneva. There also the news of Napoleon's return into France had been received, but as that meteor-man rolled on his rapid course without this time touching the Swiss Confederation or the democratic domain of Geneva, all fear speedily subsided in the latter, leaving only a sentiment of astonishment and curiosity behind. Yes, admiration of the courage, the genius, and the perseverance of the greatest hero the world ever saw, and curiosity to mark the issue of the new conflict thus provoked by single-handed France against all the allied powers of Europe.

A month, then, has passed since that conversation which took place between the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas at the former's lodging, in the city of Geneva, and now again shall we find them together, at that same place, and in earnest deliberation. But on this occasion it is about eight o'clock in the evening; the table is covered with wine and dessert, the window is open, and the zephyrs of April are wafted into the room. And it is because the double case-

ments are thus unfolded that the earl and Malpas are conversing together in low and almost whispering voices.

"Well, Curzon," said the colonel, "what, after all, is to be done? I know that during our conference this evening I have asked you that question at least a hundred times, but as you have given me no positive reply, I must e'en ask it again."

"The position of affairs is indeed most awkward," remarked the earl. "Here is Lady Sackville writing the most urgent letters to insist that something shall be done —"

"And she writes exactly in the same tone to me," interrupted Malpas. "In fact, in her last letter, she more than hints her fears that I am either trifling or else actually playing a treacherous part in the matter."

"She addresses similar reproaches to me," rejoined the earl. "Nay, more, she tells me in plain terms she will not believe me when I write and tell her that I am neither able to worm any secrets out of Julia, nor yet persuade her to run away with me."

"That is exactly the language which her ladyship uses toward me," said Malpas, "with the addition that she tells me unless I do something decided to crush or break up the conspiracy against the Princess of Wales, I may abandon the mission. In which case she warns me not to venture into her presence again as long as I live."

"She does not exactly speak in such strong language to me," observed the Earl of Curzon. "But she tells me quite as plainly that if I cannot bring matters to a speedy issue, she will not trouble me to prosecute the business any further. Indeed, she declares that circumstances now render it absolutely necessary that the conspiracy should be broken up at once."

"And yet how is it to be done?" asked Malpas. "Emma will bestow her favours upon me to my heart's content, but as for admitting me to her confidence with regard to anything that is going on, she only laughs gaily when I tell her that I know she has secrets and that she should reveal them all to me. Then, as for asking her to run away with me, she laughs still more heartily than ever, tells me I am a fool, pulls my whiskers, slaps my face, and says it will be high time for her to run off with me should she find that our amour is likely to bear fruit."

"I cannot say in respect to Julia that I have any pulling of the whiskers, slappings of the face, or merry peals of laughter," observed the Earl of Curzon, "but, on the other hand, I have plenty of sentimentalisms, tears, gentle reproaches, and tender caresses, partly assumed and partly real. For I know that the girl loves me, on the one hand, but then she has a certain portion in this curious drama to enact, on the other hand."

"I thought she faithfully promised that at the end of a month she would fly away with you," observed Malpas, "provided you would grant her that delay? And now the month is passed."

"Yes, and last night we had a strange scene," said the earl, in a tone of vexation.

"A strange scene!" ejaculated Malpas. "This puts me in mind of a scene which I have also had — with Emma, of course. It was the night before last; but as I did not see you yesterday I could not mention it before, and our serious discourse of this evening had hitherto put it out of my head — "

"Then, as your adventure took place first," interrupted Curzon, "you shall have precedence in relating it. Come, fill your glass and begin your narrative."

"It is short," responded the colonel. Then, having helped himself to wine, he said, "The night before last, soon after eleven o'clock, I scaled the garden wall of the villa, according to previous appointment, and was immediately received in the arms of my Emma. If you were out at that time you will of course remember that the night was dark as pitch, not a star nor a glimpse of the moon being visible, and the heavens entirely overclouded. In fact, it was anything but a Swiss night. I do not recollect having ever been out in a darker one even in England in the middle of January, and this is the beautiful south of Europe, and the middle of April. Well, I could not therefore see my charming Emma, but I felt her warm kisses and heard the music of her voice. I therefore knew that it was she. Besides, who else could meet me at the place of appointment? Who else be ready to guide me through the mazes of the garden, to that convenient little back entrance into the villa, up that private staircase? "

"All of which I am well acquainted with," said Curzon,

smiling. "But how was it that you had any misgivings as to the identity of the complaisant fair one who thus met you with the fair and wanton Emma whom you expected?"

"I had such misgivings," answered the colonel, "because as my fair companion hastily guided me through the garden, I felt that she had on some satin garment bordered with fur, and it instantaneously struck me — "

"Ah! and well you might have wondered," ejaculated Curzon. "My adventure, I see, was pretty well the same as yours. But pray continue."

"I was instantly struck by the recollection, I say," resumed Malpas, "that the Princess of Wales was accustomed to wear a satin cloak ornamented with ermine. But this was not all. At the same time I remembered that her Royal Highness, when rambling in her garden or in the neighbourhood of the villa, of an evening, was accustomed to wear a dark green hood. Well, to my increasing amazement and terror, I found that my companion not only had on the cloak bordered with ermine, but likewise a hood, and for the moment I trembled lest some fearful mistake had taken place. In fact, I was so terrified, or, rather, astounded, I could not speak, and we had reached the back entrance into the building ere I could so far recover my presence of mind as to stop suddenly short and demand, in a low voice, 'Are you really Emma Owen?' 'Yes, you silly fellow,' she responded, in the unmistakable accents of her gaily melodious voice, 'do you take me for a ghost?'

"I was now reassured as to the identity of my fair companion, and that was sufficient. We ascended the staircase, which, as you know, is always involved in darkness at night, and then we entered the passage from which all the principal rooms on the second story open. A lamp, as you are of course aware, is always burning in that passage, and as we emerged from the darkness of the staircase into the light of the passage, I was struck with a sort of terror on observing that Emma not only wore a satin cloak bordered with ermine, but also a green hood so exactly like the cloak and hood of her Royal Highness that I felt convinced, if they were not the same, the imitation must have been purposely intended. At the same instant Emma drew the hood hastily over her countenance, seized me by the hand, and said, in an impatient whisper, 'Come on, come on!' All in a moment did

a suspicion of the truth flash to my mind. I understood it all, or at least fancied I did, and I was rendered speechless with mingled astonishment and anger. Then, to add to my bewilderment, a door at the farther end of the passage opened suddenly and a head was thrust forth. I rather think it was that of a female, but being instantaneously withdrawn again, and the door closing even more abruptly than it had opened, I could not form any certain opinion on that point. Emma at the same instant affected — for affectation only could it have been — to be suddenly seized with a perfect consternation. I supported her in my arms, and the next moment we were safe within her chamber.

" ' We have been observed,' I said, the moment the door was secured. ' Oh, no, it is nothing,' she replied. ' Yes,' I urged, ' it is indeed something. I saw a head peep forth, and you were frightened. Wherefore should you have been thus frightened if it were nothing? ' ' Because I am nervous and you are full of terrors,' she answered, as she flung off her splendid cloak and green hood. ' Now,' said I, ' tell me candidly why you have appropriated the costume of the princess.' ' It is my own,' she exclaimed. Then, after a moment's pause, she said, with that bewitching archness of manner which renders her at times so truly ravishing, ' Do you not know, my dear Percy, that we ladies in waiting are honoured with the cast-off dresses of her Royal Highness? ' The explanation instantaneously struck me as being so feasible that I could not utter another word, and there the matter accordingly dropped.

" To make an end of this long story, I need only say that what with the blandishments, the caresses, and the delights experienced in Emma's arms, I soon forgot all about the satin cloak and the green hood, — at least until the morning, and then indeed, on being seated alone at my breakfast-table, I reconsidered the matter, and very seriously, too. With renewed force did the suspicion which had first struck me at the time recur to my imagination, and I reflected upon the whole affair in all its bearings and every point of view."

" Well, and that suspicion? " said Curzon, inquiringly. " In plain terms, what was the interpretation you put upon the matter? "

" That Miss Emma Owen," responded Malpas, " while gratifying her passion with me as her paramour, made the

means of her own enjoyment subservient to the more worldly purposes which she has in view, — or, to speak more plainly still, that she availed herself of the opportunity thus furnished to take a step calculated to damage the reputation of the Princess of Wales. By assuming her apparel it would be made to appear that it was her Royal Highness herself who thus introduced a paramour into the villa, and the head thrust forth from the room at the end of the passage was that of the person who was to be the witness of her Royal Highness's presumed frailty. Such was my suspicion at the time, and such, on mature consideration, is my conviction now."

"The deduction you have made embraces a truth which my own adventure positively confirms. Yours," continued the Earl of Curzon, "took place the night before last; mine occurred last night — and now I will relate it. It was shortly after eleven when, according to previous appointment, I entered the grounds of the villa, and was immediately folded in the loving embrace of the sentimental Julia. The moon last night was clear and beautiful, the aspect of the heavens being very different from that of the preceding night, the darkness of which you have so particularly alluded to. Well, on meeting Julia last night, I found her tender and sentimental as ever. She was dressed in a loose wrapper, having thrown off the formal splendours of her evening toilet. She is really a beauteous creature, and as the moonbeams, with all the power of their argentine lustre sublimated, as it were, to a still purer and chaster brilliancy by the reflection of the snow which crowns the mountaintops, shone upon the figure of my Julia, it seemed to me at the time as if I had seldom gazed upon a creature so sweetly beautiful, and so tenderly captivating. And though I could not help thinking that half her sentimentalism was nought but affectation, and therefore downright hypocrisy, I could not help loving her, I could not help straining her passionately in my arms, so true it is that a beautiful mistress, even though known to be an unprincipled wanton and full of duplicity, often wields a power with her seductive blandishments which a wife can never exercise.

"However, I am not going to sermonize upon this point. I have already said enough for you to understand that Julia looked indescribably lovely, that her caresses were unusually tender, and that I was maudlin loving. Therefore,

although my original intention was not to accompany her to her own chamber unless she was prepared to give me her solemn pledge to fly with me within a day or two, I suffered her to lead me toward the back entrance, and the next moment the door closed behind us and we were ascending in the darkness of the private staircase. On reaching the first landing, where, as I need scarcely tell you, there is no light at all, Julia hastily whispered that I should pause for a moment, and then I heard the rustling of silk or satin, as if she were putting on some garment which lay ready to her hand on the table of that landing. I had not time to form any conjecture upon the subject, for the next instant she took me by the hand and led me on again.

" In a few moments we reached the summit of the next flight, and then emerged into the passage where the lamp burns at night. Ah! conceive my astonishment, mingled with shame and rage, when, as the beams of that lamp suddenly shone upon her, I observed that she was enveloped in a satin cloak bordered with ermine, and that she wore upon her head a dark hood which was drawn forward so as entirely to conceal her countenance. An ejaculation escaped my lips, but she seized my arm with convulsive violence, and at the same moment a door opened at the end of the passage, — doubtless the same one whence you had seen the head peep forth on the preceding night. But on this occasion it was not merely a head, but an entire form that came forth from that door, and, as well as I could observe, it was an elderly female, most probably one of the English menials belonging to the household. On catching sight of my companion, she instantly retreated, closing the door hurriedly. At the same instant Julia dragged me forward into her own chamber, and, fastening the door, she immediately flung off the cloak and the hood, precipitating herself into my arms, and endeavouring to drown my recollections in the flood of bliss which her kisses, her toyings, and her dalliances poured upon me.

" But I was not to be thus appeased. The whole truth of the manœuvre which had just taken place was transparent as daylight. I read it all, I saw that I had been suddenly rendered a means of compromising her Royal Highness in the gravest and most serious manner, and I felt furiously indignant as well as deeply humiliated to think that Julia

should have succeeded in making me her agent, her tool, and her instrument for such a purpose. But still I dared not suffer her to read all that was passing in my mind. I was careful not to say anything to make her suspect that I had a secret mission to protect and succour the princess, instead of helping to ruin her. Therefore, subduing the real state of my feelings as well as I was able, I said, 'Julia, wherefore that disguise which you ere now assumed?' 'Simply to avoid the chance of detection,' she at once answered. 'But,' said I, 'do not that cloak and hood belong to the princess?' 'No,' she responded, with unblushing effrontery, 'they are mine. You are aware,' she immediately added, 'that in my capacity I receive a share of her Royal Highness's left-off apparel.' 'But,' I still urged, 'was it not sheer madness or else the deepest wickedness thus to assume such a disguise at such an hour and under such circumstances?' Julia thereupon burst into tears, admitting that she had been very thoughtless indeed, but beseeching that I would think no more of it.

"I knew, of course, that she was now playing the hypocrite, and that her duplicity was unredeemed by any softer feeling, notwithstanding the caresses she continued to lavish upon me. I accordingly reminded her, in a severe tone, that some female issuing from the room at the end of the passage had just observed us. 'Oh,' she exclaimed, 'it was merely Mrs. Hubbard, the English laundress belonging to the household, and she will not say a word.' I asked her how she was so confident that Mrs. Hubbard would keep the secret, reminding her that the impression made upon the woman must have been that it was the princess herself, the wife of England's regent, whom she had thus observed in the act of introducing a paramour into the villa. Julia had her answer ready. 'Yes,' she said, 'I know all that, and it is precisely because Mrs. Hubbard must think it was the princess that the secret will be kept.'

"She then proceeded to tell me, with an air of the tenderest confidence, and with many injunctions that I would not repeat her averments, that her Royal Highness not only carries on a criminal intrigue with her principal equerry, Baron Bergami, but that she admits other paramours into the villa, — not a syllable of all which did I believe. 'Mrs. Hubbard,' continued Julia, 'is in the princess's confidence,

and therefore it cannot make matters worse if she just now mistook me for her Royal Highness. At all events,' added Julia, 'you surely cannot be angry that I should adopt, for the purpose of saving my own reputation, a precaution which in its consequences cannot damage the reputation of the princess more than it is already injured in the estimation of all her household.' "

"What answer did you make to this precious sophistry?" inquired Malpas.

"What could I say?" exclaimed Curzon. "It would have seemed singular indeed to Julia for me to be more tender about the reputation of the princess than of her own. Leaving, therefore, that subject, I reminded her that the month's delay for which she had stipulated was now passed, and that she must make up her mind either to fly away with me or remain at Geneva without me. Then came plenty of entreaties, remonstrances, excuses, evasions, and tears. But I gave her positively to understand that I would play this hide-and-seek game no longer. We had a scene, the details of which I need scarcely enter into; suffice it to say, that at daybreak this morning I parted from Julia with nothing understood — nothing agreed upon. In fact, I see perfectly well that she considers me a mere instrument in her hands, — a paramour to gratify her sensualities, and a cat's-paw in the carrying out of the conspiracy wherein she and her sisters are engaged."

"Your adventure, Curzon," said Malpas, "proves that the two sisters, Emma and Julia, are acting entirely in concert. Even with regard to ourselves they have no secrets from each other. I mean, it is evident that Emma knows of the amour Julia is carrying on with you, and that Julia is aware of the intrigue Emma is carrying on with me."

"But it is also evident," remarked the earl, "that they do not entertain the slightest suspicion that you and I ever meet, much less that we compare notes of all that is passing. Our real mission at Geneva is therefore unsuspected by them. They look upon us as mere gallants tied to their petticoat strings, and dream not that our real aim is to break up the conspiracy in which they are engaged."

"Heaven only knows what they do suspect and what they don't!" exclaimed Malpas. "Such duplicity, such artifice, such hypocrisy, I never knew before. That they have no

secrets from each other is clear from the adoption of the same stratagem concerning the cloak and hood, and also from the utterance of the same identical excuse about being entitled to her Royal Highness's cast-off clothing — "

"And the same facts prove," interjected Curzon, "that they do not dream of you and me meeting and comparing notes."

"Just so," rejoined Malpas. "But it is of no use wasting precious time in mere comment. Very certain is it that so far from you and me having done anything to break up the conspiracy, we actually find ourselves inveigled as it were into it, and instead of counteracting the designs and proceedings of these young ladies, we have positively and literally become their dupes. Again, therefore, do I ask you what is to be done? "

"There is only one thing which I can see," responded Curzon, with the air of a man who suddenly makes up his mind to the adoption of a course on which he has previously been deliberating.

"And what is that? " inquired Malpas.

"Look you," resumed the earl, without immediately answering the question. "For my part, I am resolved not to remain in the position of the mere hide-and-seek gallant of a court lady, receiving her favours as a great boon, and incurring the risk of becoming her dupe again and again. I am, moreover, anxious to take some decisive step at once, in order to convince Lady Sackville that I have not been idle or inactive; and lastly, I am anxious to get back to England as soon as possible, for fear lest Napoleon, now that he is once again in France, should so effectually seal up every means of return, alike by land and sea, that we stand a chance of being made prisoners of war, no matter to what part of Europe we may retire."

"All these considerations weigh equally with me," observed Colonel Malpas, "and I am therefore ready to adopt any plan you may suggest. What project have you in view? "

"To carry off the sisters Emma and Julia by main force," answered the Earl of Curzon, in a decisive tone.

"Yes, that is indeed the best mode of procedure," exclaimed Malpas. "But you and I cannot accomplish the affair alone and unassisted — "

" Of course not," interrupted Curzon. " I have not merely reflected well upon this matter, but have even gone so far as to make certain preliminary arrangements. I will explain how. One night — I dare say it must have been five weeks ago — I was rambling on the banks of the lake, when suddenly turning the angle of the old jetty or pier, I came most unexpectedly upon three men who were dragging something out of the water. It was a dead body, — the corpse of a sailor who had been drowned a day or two previously, and for which these men had been fishing. At least, such was the account they gave me. I remained through curiosity to converse with them and watch their proceedings. But presently I found that I was one too many on that spot, and it struck me, from the ominous nature of the looks which they threw upon me in the clear moonlight, and from the curt answers they gave to my questions, that I was interfering with some object they had in view. I accordingly bade them ' good night,' and sauntered away; but concealing myself behind the pier, I watched their movements. One of them went and fetched a horse and cart from a thicket where the equipage had previously been concealed. They then placed the body in the cart, and sped away toward the city. Urged on by an irresistible feeling of curiosity, I followed them at a convenient distance, the sounds of their vehicle enabling me to pursue the direction which they took. To be brief, I followed the party until they reached a house in a low neighbourhood. A lamp burning over the door indicated that it was a doctor's, and from the deep shade of the adjacent dwellings I could see what was going on. The body was taken into the doctor's house; two of the men immediately afterward went away with the cart, and the third issued forth in a few minutes. I then understood how my presence on the shore of the lake had proved somewhat embarrassing to those three scoundrels, whose evident occupation was the fishing up of drowned men, not for the purpose of Christian burial, but for the dissecting-room."

" Well," observed Malpas, " I cannot possibly see what all this has got to do with our present business."

" I have not quite finished my story," replied Lord Curzon. " A few days ago, when I found the month's delay drawing to a close and saw little chance of Julia's consenting to fly with me, the idea of carrying her off by force first struck me,

and I felt persuaded that you would not hesitate to adopt the same course with regard to Emma. I accordingly went down for another moonlight ramble on the shores of the lake, and there, according to my expectation, I found the fishers of men. For a boat had been upset in the morning by a sudden squall, and three or four persons were drowned. 'Where the carrion is, the crows will be found,' says the proverb. So it was in this case. I accosted the men at once, disarmed them of hostility by putting gold into their hands, and then frankly and fearlessly told them that I knew they were three desperadoes, and that it was quite probable I should need their services in some desperate adventure. To be brief, — without explaining to them what the nature of the service might be, — I retained them with liberal fees for any night and for any enterprise I may choose to name; and you may depend upon it, Malpas, that we shall find three able coadjutors in Kobolt the Genevese, Hernani the Italian, and Walden the Switzer."

"Bravo!" exclaimed Malpas. "The affair is already as good as settled. Now let us discuss all the details."

But we need not follow the colonel and the nobleman in the arrangement of their plans; we shall therefore leave them for the present, while we direct the attention of the reader elsewhere.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE GOSSIPS

In the preceding chapter we have spoken more than once of a long passage, or corridor, whence opened the principal sleeping apartments in the villa occupied by her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales; and we have likewise stated that from a certain room at the end of this passage some female had observed the proceedings of Malpas and Curzon with their paramours. We will now introduce our readers into the apartment thus alluded to, and likewise to the two persons whom we shall find there at the time.

The room itself was modestly furnished, in a manner evidently intended for the occupation of a menial dependent. It was nevertheless perfectly comfortable, and admirably clean. It had a window looking upon the grounds at the back, and a staircase in one corner led up to a large laundry overhead.

As Julia had informed Curzon, this room we have just described was in the occupation of Mrs. Hubbard, the laundress of the household. She was an elderly woman, tall in stature, lank in form, and precise in dress. The angular outlines of her countenance, the peering sharpness and restlessness of her eyes, and the very accents of her voice denoted the lover of scandal and the inveterate gossip as well as the consummate hypocrite. She had been two or three years in the household of the princess, and by currying favour with everybody in a wily, insidious manner had contrived to make herself tolerably well liked, although it only needed a little study of her physiognomy to prove that she was a woman most dangerous to be trusted and impossible to be relied on.

Upon the present occasion Mrs. Hubbard was receiving

a visit from an English friend who had arrived at Geneva. This was a Mrs. Dakin, occuping the position of housekeeper to Sir Clubley Spokes, an eccentric old baronet, who was very fond of travelling about, and who in his tours was attended by a retinue of half a dozen servants. Mrs. Dakin was likewise an elderly person, — as much given to gossip and scandal as her friend Mrs. Hubbard, — and devotedly attached to a drop of ardent spirit, although she never would admit that she took it otherwise than medicinally.

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, on the day following the conversation recorded in the preceding chapter, that the worthy Mrs. Dakin thus paid her respects to her amiable and excellent friend Mrs. Hubbard. After the first greetings had taken place, Mrs. Hubbard, like the "old mother" in the nursery legend, went to her cupboard. It was not, however, to get a bone for her dog, seeing that she had no dog at all to take care of, but it was to bring forth the brandy-bottle for herself and her friend. But all the while she was thus producing the "creature comfort," she went on talking in an abstracted manner, upon the weather, the beauty of the lake, the snow of the distant mountains, and other matters equally interesting, while Mrs. Dakin vouchsafed her answers and volunteered her comments with all the appearance of one totally unconscious of the temptation which was thus being placed in her way. Then Mrs. Hubbard returned to the cupboard, and on this occasion it was to procure a couple of wine-glasses, which she placed upon the table; and while still discoursing upon a variety of indifferent topics she filled up the two glasses with the potent fluid. Mrs. Dakin was now intent upon looking out of the window, as if perfectly unsuspicious, poor soul! of the dreadful conspiracy thus going on against any habit of teetotalism which she might be inclined to practise, though Heaven can attest that if the redness on the tip of the nose be taken as any criterion in the matter, it was very little teetotalism indeed that entered within the sphere of worthy Mrs. Dakin's daily habits.

"Deary me, Mrs. Hubbard, whatever have you bin an' done?" now ejaculated worthy Mrs. Dakin, holding up her hands and turning up her eyes in apparent dismay as she caught sight of the two glasses filled to the brim. "Wal,

I never did see such a dear, inticin', insiniwatin', coaxin', captiwatin' creatur' as you air in all my born days."

"Come, Mrs. Dakin dear," said Mrs. Hubbard, assuming a tone and look of bland entreaty, "I am aweer that your habits is sober-iety itself and that you never touches nothink short or warm afore dinner, but on such a occasion as this — ven two friends as is friends, and rale friends, too, meets after a long separation and in a furrin land, amung a passel of selvidges as one may say, to whom our blessed mother tongue is altogether unbeknown — I do think, under such circumstances," added the royal laundress, persuasively, "you may take a leetle drop jest to rinse your mouth."

"Wal, dear," observed Mrs. Dakin, "jest to wash the dust out, as you so poethetically expresses it. And after all," continued the worthy dame, as she took a long gasp of pleasure when she had drained the glass, "after all, there is wuss things in the world than a drop of that fiery stuff, though heavins knows I never do touch it eggsept as a meddisin."

"And I'm sure, my dear," resumed Mrs. Hubbard, with a gloomy shake of her head, "that it rekvires a leetle of this meddisin to keep up one's sperrets while fur away from hold Hingland with its white cliftis."

"Oh, that it do, my dear," said Mrs. Dakin, thrusting her pocket-handkerchief into the corner of her eye, so as to appear deeply affected. "I don't know how it be, but so it is, that I can't abear to be away from my natif Halbion, although I were born on board a ship far away in the Vest Ingies."

"Was you, though?" exclaimed Mrs. Hubbard, as if quite astounded. "Wal, I've knowed you now seventeen year, this last fust of Aperil — I mind it was a Aperil when we was interdooced, 'cos it was on All Fools' Day, at dear Mrs. Humby's which kept the Boar and Cauliflower, you remember."

"In course I remember," cried Mrs. Dakin, her features brightening up with the pleasant reminiscences of earlier days. "Wal, and that was seventeen year ago, so it were. Lor, how time does fly! What a queer thing time is, to be sure! But tal me, my dear, how do you like bein' in furrin' parts?"

"Don't ax me, Mrs. Dakin," cried the laundress; "I can't abear it. I look upon all furriners as a passel of reskels,

and now that the sassy feller Boningparty has got back into France — "

"Ah! deary me," groaned Mrs. Dakin, "the bare hidear of what will happen to us all is more than enough to give one the collyrer morbis," and she threw a desperate longing glance at the brandy-bottle.

"Heavins! you don't mean for to go for to say that you're so narvous and eggsited as all that?" exclaimed Mrs. Hubbard, very prudently replenishing the glasses. "Come, take it quick, my dear, or you'll go off into a fit of relapse. But I won't talk no more about Boningparty and what he may do to us all, since it perduces such a heffect upon you," added Mrs. Hubbard, soothingly, as Mrs. Dakin poured the dram down her throat and indulged in another long sigh of pleasure. "Let's talk of our sitiwations. Tal me, are you comfortable in yourn?"

"Pretty wal," responded Mrs. Dakin. "Nothink wery perticklar to complain on, and then, I rayther think," she added, with a mysterious look and low whisper, "I rayther think Sir Clubley has put my name in his will."

"Do you, though?" exclaimed Mrs. Hubbard. "I cog-gratelate you, my dear, that I do. He seems such a nice old gentleman."

"Oh, not him, he's so peewish and quarrelsome," cried Mrs. Dakin, sharply.

"Wal, I thought he looked like it, my dear," observed the laundress, with a mournful shake of the head.

"And then he's so mean," exclaimed Mrs. Dakin, her virtuous indignation gradually rising. "He keeps the key of the caddie —"

"The willin!" ejaculated Mrs. Hubbard, in sincere yet savage sympathy with her old friend.

"And he adds up all his bills," continued Mrs. Dakin.

"Wal, I never!" said the laundress, in dismay.

"And he counts the wine-bottles."

"Wuss and wuss," groaned Mrs. Hubbard.

"And he actiwally keeps a list of his own linen."

"Arter that, I'm done!" murmured the royal laundress, who evidently could not find words sufficiently strong to express her indignation at the conduct of Sir Clubley Spokes, while she regarded Mrs. Dakin as the most injured woman in the world.

In fact, so very affecting and so pathetically interesting was the present scene that when Mrs. Hubbard again filled the glasses, Mrs. Dakin drank off her dram without a word of comment, much less a murmur of remonstrance, so deep was the abstraction of her thoughts.

" Wal," said Mrs. Hubbard, at length, " I've heerd of wild beastesses that tears the hinnocent lambs limb from limb, I've heerd of savage Ingins which preys upon human flesh, roast or biled, but I never heerd of such owdacious cruelty as that which this Sir Tubley Stokes, or leastways whatever his name be, is a practysing on you."

" Wal, it is too bad, a deal too bad," said Mrs. Dakin, again inflaming her right optic with the square foot of cambric which she carried in her hand. " But how do you get on, my dear? You seem to have a nice berth of it."

" Pritty good, pritty good," ejaculated Mrs. Hubbard. Then, after pursing up her mouth in a very mysterious manner, she said, " The wages is good, the pervisions is good, and there isn't no stint of liquor, eether wine, beer, or brandy. But — "

And the worthy laundress, stopping suddenly short, shook her head with dark and sinister meaning.

" Wal, whatever is the matter? " asked Mrs. Dakin. " Do you feel hill, my dear, do you feel hill? "

" Y-e-s," murmured the laundress, faintly, and sinking back in her chair, as if overpowered by the unutterable nature of her thoughts.

" Heavins! she'll swoon, she'll swoon! " shrieked Mrs. Dakin, awfully excited, and she filled up the two glasses. " Here, my walooed friend, the meddisin! "

" You're too kind! " groaned the laundress, and having allowed Mrs. Dakin to pour the brandy down her throat, she thought it expedient to recover.

" Well, what is it now? " asked Mrs. Dakin, in a tone of friendly confidence. " Come, tal me what it is that hails you. Summut the matter with the place, eh? Wal, I thought so. Is it the tea and sugar? "

" No, I've enow of both."

" Is it the goin' out on a Sunday? "

" No, I can go out and come in when I likes, purvided I does my work. It isn't that."

" Then is it ' no follerers ' ? " asked Mrs. Dakin.

" Not that, neether, dear," was the mournful response.

" Then what in Heavin's name be it? " inquired Sir Clubley Spokes's housekeeper, terribly perplexed.

" It's the — morals! " gasped Mrs. Hubbard, as if with the last effort of expiring nature; but almost immediately rallying with a groan, she looked her companion very hard in the face for upwards of three minutes.

" The morals? " echoed the housekeeper. Then, drawing her chair close up to that of Mrs. Hubbard, she said, in a hushed tone and with that earnestness of manner which only real gossips and scandal-mongers can possibly assume, " Whatever do you mean, dear? Tal me what you mean? "

" I mean, my buzzim friend," responded the laundress, shaking her head very, very lugubriously indeed, " that it is a wery vicked vorld, and full of all sorts of hintrigues, but no place in all this vorld so vicked is half so vicked as this here willa. It is the wussest, dear, the wussest."

" Gracious goodness me! " murmured Mrs. Dakin, holding up her hands in awful consternation. " Who'd have thought it? "

" The goin's-on is dreadful," continued Mrs. Hubbard.

" Well, I'm not surprised," observed Mrs. Dakin, " for my old master is the greatest reskel and willin vith the vimen I ever did come near. He can't let me alone."

" And I'm sure there's a certing personidge under this roof as can't let the men alone," proceeded Mrs. Hubbard. " Yes, my dear, vun of our own sex, and more shame for her, which can't keep in her proper spear, but demeans herself with a passel of fellers, — adwenturers and good for nothinks, I suppose."

" But who on earth do you allude to, my dear? " asked Mrs. Dakin, intensely and thrillingly interested in her friend's discourse.

" I alludes to one which ought to be a eggsample of morality and wertew, instead of a patten of veakness and wice. I allude," continued Mrs. Hubbard, with an air of awful mystery, and in a tone as hollow and sepulchral as if she were telling a ghost story, " I allude to one which ought to sit upon a pinnikle of eggselence, instead of sinking down into a gulf of degradation. I allude, my old friend, — and I know your buzzim will throb when I tal you, — I allude to her Ryal Ighness the Princess of Vales."

"No!" exclaimed the housekeeper, throwing up her arms, and keeping them up, too, in utter dismay. "You can't — you don't — you niver would — "

"I means what I says," rejoined the laundress, sharply. "You never knowed me tal a lie in all my life, and I wouldn't to save myself from death or the workus. No, not I. And so I repeat, the goin's-on in this 'ouse is dreadful. Why, the princess is a perfect rake, a reglar demirep. I never see such things. It was dear Mrs. Ranger as fust opened my heyes to what was going on. A dear good soul is that Mrs. Ranger, and sweet, nice gals is them she brought into the ryal 'ousehold some foo months ago. Heavin send that they may egscape contermination."

"Is the princess so very bad, then?" asked Mrs. Dakin. "I thought she was such a matron-like, honest-looking, open-countenanced lady."

"She!" almost shrieked Mrs. Hubbard. "She is a regular out and out bad un as ever was. Why, she carries on her hintrigues with a unblushing boldness. There is Bigamy, the he-query, as they call him, goes openly to her chamber — I've sin him, yes, I've sin him. Mrs. Ranger has bin and put me on the watch to look out for him. Then as for other lovyers, why, the princess has a dozen. 'Twas on'y three nights ago, Mrs. Ranger came and put me on the lookout. She suspected summut wrong was a goin' on, and she was right, too. So every now and then, when I thought I heerd a footstep, I peeps out, and presently, lo and behold ye! there was the princess with her vermin cloak and her green hood on, a-bringing in a lovyer along the passidge to her own room! Oh, it was too bad!"

"Too bad indeed!" observed Mrs. Dakin, drawing her chair still closer, and feeling so deeply interested in the present topic that even the brandy-bottle itself was lost sight of. "Wal, what nixt?"

"What nixt?" echoed Mrs. Hubbard. Then, suddenly lowering her voice to a mysterious whisper, she said, "I'll tal you, my dear, what nixt. Why, the princess is — "

"No!" ejaculated Mrs. Dakin, in dismay.

"Yes!" returned Mrs. Hubbard, dogmatically.

"You flabbergast me!" said the former.

"I'm flabbergasted myself," rejoined the latter.

" But however did this come beknown to you? " inquired Mrs. Dakin.

" In the fust place," answered the laundress, " I've got heyes, and in the second place, I've got hears."

" But is it so wery appearant? " asked Mrs. Dakin.

" No, you can't see any out'ard and wisible sign," responded Mrs. Hubbard. " But Mrs. Ranger is in the secret, and she has showed me all the babby-linnen, and she has told me how everythink is settled, the doctor engaged, the child a-ready prowided for even afore 'tis born."

" Lork-a-daisy me! " murmured Mrs. Dakin, with divers ominous shakes of the head. " And who is the doctor? "

" One Vermicelli, I think the name be," answered Mrs. Hubbard. " But it's all jist as I tell you, my dear, and though dear good Mrs. Ranger comes in now and then, quite permiscuous like, to take a leetle drop of brandy and have a few minnits' gossip, I wouldn't for all the world betray the confidence she imposes in me."

" Not for the world — oh, deary me, no! " ejaculated Mrs. Dakin. " You may rely on me keepin' all you've told me as profound a secret as if so be it was writ in a letter and sinked with a stone to the bottom of a well. But doesn't the ryal ladies subspect what a condition their missus is in? "

" Not they, poor dear hinnocent lambkins! " exclaimed Mrs. Hubbard. " There's the three Miss Owens, quite patterns of wirtew and perpriety, what can they know? Then there's the other three ladies in waitin', a leetle holder than the Owens, but every bit as moral. No, there's on'y Mrs. Ranger in the secret, and this Doctor Marmajelly, or whatsomever his name raly be."

" Wal, my dear friend," said Mrs. Dakin, " you have surprised me with a wengeance. Goings-on indeed! Who could have fancied it? And yet, betwixt you and me and the bedpost, I always did take her Ryal 'Ighness for a queer creatur', and I ain't a bit supprised at what I've heerd, when I come to think on it. It's jest as I thought and no more than I subspected."

In this manner did the two gossips continue to discourse, but ere they separated, the glasses were refilled and drained, in order, as Mrs. Hubbard very properly expressed herself, to " cool down their eggsited feelin's after the handlin' of such rousin' topics." Nor did they take leave of each other

without a promise on the part of the royal laundress to keep a close watch on everything that might take place within the walls of the villa, so as to glean fresh food for a cosy gossip the next time Mrs. Dakin should " chance to drop in upon her."

END OF VOLUME VIII.